

The Australian National Placenames Survey

A History

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AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL PLACENAMES SURVEY

Published for the Australian National Placenames Survey

This online edition: June 2026

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Published by Placenames Australia (Inc.)
PO Box 5160
South Turramurra
NSW 2074

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1 THE BEGINNINGS: The Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1969-1970

1969

The Australian Humanities Research Council was reconstituted as the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and the eminent historian Sir Keith Hancock was elected Foundation President. Earlier Hancock had played an important role establishing the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, which has to date published 18 volumes covering individuals who died up to 1990 (and work is under way on further volumes to cover those who died in the years to 1995). As President of the Academy he judged it important to lay the foundations for long-term cooperative projects that would lead to standard authoritative reference works of Australian scholarship. For example, he strongly supported the Academy in instituting work on a historical dictionary of Australian English, which was eventually published in 1988 as the *Australian National Dictionary*.

1970

The Council of the Academy resolved to set up a national committee to establish guidelines for research in Australian placenames and to help coordinate work in this field. Its planners judged that it would contribute eventually to the recording of disappearing Aboriginal languages and to a detailed history of the spread of settlement. Hancock believed that a placenames project on historical principles was one of the few endeavours of major scholarly worth that were within the limited resources of the Academy. His thinking was guided mainly by knowledge of the achievements of the English Place-Name Society and by the advice of Marcel Arousseau who had recently returned to Australia after many years as Executive Secretary of the UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names.

The committee established had the distinguished historian Professor Manning Clark of the Australian National University as convenor, and the other members were Professor O.H.K. Spate of the ANU; Professor R.W.V. Elliott of Flinders University, Adelaide; Professor A.G. Mitchell of Macquarie University, Sydney; Professor J.S. Ryan of the University of New England, Armidale; Marcel Arousseau; B.P. Lambert, Director of the Division of National Mapping; and F.D. McCarthy, Director of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

The committee first met in July 1970, and considered a paper by Arousseau on a proposed dictionary of Australian placenames. Eventually it was decided that *dictionary* had too strong a linguistic association, and that it would be more sensible to work towards what was called a '*survey* of Australian placenames on historical principles'.

The committee also decided that it needed to determine on a regional starting point for the survey and noted the extensive work that had been done on Aboriginal names in South

Australia: Norman Tindale's manuscript material was available, and T.G.H. Strehlow was known to be compiling a map of placenames for Central Australia. South Australia was also seen by the committee as having advantages for non-Aboriginal placename research in that it was a colony which had been settled in a systematic fashion; it had been surveyed before settlement on the basis of counties and hundreds; and its land records were accessible and known to be accurate.

So the committee decided that work should begin in South Australia, and a grant application would be made to the Australian Research Grants Committee. The work of a research assistant in the Department of Lands was to be supervised by John Tregenza of the History Department at the University of Adelaide. Unfortunately, in September 1970 Dr Tregenza had to change these plans. The committee then decided to postpone work in South Australia.

2 THE FIRST PHASE: The University of New England, 1971-1974

Hancock then thought of Tasmania as an alternative, but finally settled on northern New South Wales as a suitable location for a pilot project. The area was then being mapped by the Lands Department for its 2-inches-to-1-mile series; and the area had useful links with the University of New England, Ryan's institution. The Academy advertised for a research assistant to work throughout 1971, and suitable accommodation was found in the Arts Faculty at UNE. Mrs Judith Waters was appointed, and began work on the Land District of Walcha.

A.T. Yarwood and J.S. Ryan put in a grant application for 1972-4, requesting funding for a research fellow as well as the part-time research assistant. The application was successful, and Hancock asked John Atchison to take up the position. Atchison, who was a doctoral student of Manning Clark's, agreed on the understanding that he would not be committed to staying with the project after the three-year period, when it was assumed it would move to Adelaide (taking up the South Australian connection) or Canberra (the federal capital).

By early 1974 the project had developed a basic library of the key literature, and a regional register (by copying placenames by hand from maps onto index cards); the initial methodology and liaison networks with government departments and community organisations were reasonably well established; and John Atchison had written the first draft of his *Guidelines for research in Australian place names*. Unfortunately, strained state-Commonwealth relations and a rapidly declining economy led to a decision that the envisaged national project should not proceed.

The Academy looked to a New South Wales university to take over the project on a reduced scale. In fact, both the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales responded eagerly. Professor F.K. Crowley, Dean of Arts at UNSW, had taken over from Manning Clark as chair of the committee, and wanted to be involved; and Professor John Ward of the University of Sydney strongly wished to continue the project with his university's rich resources in history, geography, and linguistics. The Academy was unable or unwilling to resolve the matter, and decided to 'rest' the project in September 1974.

3 A LENGTHY HIATUS: Various attempts at a fresh start, 1975-1990

1975-84

Despite the fact that there followed a decade of almost complete inactivity, John Atchison's view was that this hiatus was not entirely disastrous. The idea of the survey, he believed, was sound and timely, but there was an unresolved structural problem. This largely arose from the liaison between the NSW Department of Lands and the federal Division of National Mapping which was needed for the pilot project. The liaison worked well at a personal level, but deteriorating state-Commonwealth relations required all formal communications to be routed through a Cabinet subcommittee, and that had clearly been a hindrance. In addition, it had become clear to the placenames committee that it was going to be important to establish formal structures to involve the nomenclature authorities in each state. A period of consolidation would be useful to begin to accomplish this.

During the period 1975-78, John Atchison conducted informal discussions with Manning Clark, Geoffrey Blainey, and Ian Donaldson (Director of the History Research Centre at ANU) with a view to establishing a workable structure for the long term that would encompass both academic and governmental concerns. The Surveyor General of Western Australia, J.F. Morgan, as a member of the National Mapping Council, was highly supportive of the concept of national cooperation between the various agencies. He suggested to John Atchison that the latter should attempt to bring together all interested parties. In the event, it was John Morgan himself who issued a general invitation to meet in Perth immediately before the XII Conference of the International Cartographic Association.

1986

The Perth 1984 meeting resolved to continue on an annual basis, and led in fact to the formation of the Committee for Geographical Names in Australia (CGNA) in 1986. It meets at least biennially, and sees its function as the coordination of activities concerned with the naming of places and the storage and dissemination of that information both nationally and internationally. It consists of representatives from state and territory geographical names authorities, and Commonwealth defence and civilian agencies. In 1998, with New Zealand's admission to membership, it became the Committee for Geographical Names of Australasia; the Australian National Placenames Survey is now also a full member.

In 1986 the CGNA affiliated with the National Mapping Council, which had been founded in 1945. The Council was replaced by the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping in 1988, and since 1993 the CGNA has constituted a permanent committee of the ICSM, with the support of Geoscience Australia. (To reflect that status, in 2016 the committee was renamed the Permanent Committee on Place Names - PCPN.) The major

structural changes had at least one beneficial effect in that the long-standing state-Commonwealth concerns over jurisdiction were replaced by agreement within ICSM to finance an executive officer with a national coordination role. This agreement has been of vital importance, since it has established a context within which successful completion of the *Gazetteer of Australia* was possible. Nevertheless, the role of the PCPN is very much technical, being concerned with the determination of the official form of placenames and the exact location of the features to which they refer. With limited budgets the various authorities represented on PCPN have been able to do relatively little in respect of the complementary cultural aspects -- i.e. research into the history, origin, and meaning of placenames -- and this is now the mission of the ANPS.

1987

Throughout the 1980s John Atchison maintained his interest in these aspects of toponymy and continued to put before academic agencies the needs of structured placenames research. In 1987 Ian Donaldson reviewed the Australian National Dictionary Project, which after 10 years had completed a text for publication, and recommended that an Australian National Dictionary Centre be formed to continue the work, in association with Oxford University Press Australia, and that it also be mandated to sponsor placename studies.

The director, W.S. Ramson, contacted John Atchison, and the two planned to call another meeting of interested parties to revive the project. The aim of the meeting, to be jointly sponsored by Donaldson's History Research Centre and Ramson's Australian National Dictionary Centre was stated to be: 'to investigate the feasibility of preparing a dictionary of 10,000 placenames which might be published in 2001 (the Centenary of Federation), as well as a longer-term and more ambitious compilation of placenames; to estimate the size of these tasks and the nature of the work; to consider who might do it, where it might be done, and how it might be funded?.'

1990

After an attempt at holding a seminar in October 1990 fell through because of apparent lack of interest, a more informal meeting was held at ANU, attended by W.S. Ramson, Director of the ANDC; Professor Graeme Clarke, Director of the HRC; John Ritchie, General Editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*; John Atchison; Lynette Cole of Monash University, Melbourne; and David Blair, of Macquarie University, Sydney. The meeting constituted itself as an interim steering committee for the national toponymy project, and agreed that a representative of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies should be sought to complement the team.

The group agreed that a selective dictionary should be planned for publication in 2001, and that John Atchison should seek study leave in order to work up a funding application. The various Centres represented were to cooperate in the project and would make, in the first instance, informal approaches to various funding and sponsoring agencies. The interim steering committee was aware of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's interest in the pronunciation of placenames, for example, and the Dictionary Research Centre at Macquarie University was asked to contact the Corporation with a view to

cooperating in that aspect of the dictionary. Although the ABC was sympathetic to the proposal, funding difficulties and a preference for publishing only material which resulted from broadcast programs proved an insuperable barrier.

4 THE SECOND PHASE: The University of New England, 1991-1996

1991

The first half of 1991 was taken up with preparing an application for a Cooperative Infrastructure Development grant, but this was not proceeded with because the necessary matching funds from other sources were not forthcoming. An application for an Australian Research Council grant was submitted instead, but was unsuccessful -- largely, it is believed, because the project was data-oriented rather than theoretical.

1994

By now John Atchison's other interests and responsibilities were militating against his continued energetic involvement in the project, and since the interim steering committee relied on his expertise and enthusiasm as a driving force, the prognosis seemed poor. The appearance of the enthusiastic amateur Bill Noble breathed new life into the project, and his availability led to a new initiative.

1995

Noble encouraged a meeting in mid-1995 between John Atchison, David Blair, and Professor Ian Jack of the University of Sydney. This small group resolved to try once more to gather interested parties together, and in October 1995 Ian Jack hosted a meeting which drew together 25 delegates from a wide range of academic and government agencies. The meeting was addressed by several speakers including Peter Orlovich of the Royal Australian Historical Society, John Parker of the Committee for Geographical Names in Australia, and Margaret Clunies Ross of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

The meeting asked Bill Noble, David Blair, and Helen Arthurson of the University of New England Research Unit to form a working group for the purpose of investigating funding options. Soon after the meeting, Helen Arthurson's position at UNE was disestablished and she had to relinquish her work with the project.

1996

Bill Noble and David Blair gave presentations in July and September 1996 to the Australian Historical Association biennial conference and the Mapping Sciences Congress. Following an encouraging response at both, they sought funding from the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the long-term godparent of the project. The President, Professor Margaret Clunies Ross, was warmly supportive of the proposal, and the Academy formally submitted

an application for support from the Australian Research Council's Learned Academies Program special projects fund.

This application was for a two-year pilot project to develop a methodology and management structure for the long-term survey as a whole. The funding requested amounted basically to support for one full-time research fellow, with a modest maintenance and travel allowance, to work at Macquarie University under the direction of David Blair. This application was submitted in late 1996 and received approval early in 1997.

5 THE THIRD PHASE: Macquarie University, 1997-2006

1997-99

The research fellowship was advertised in mid-1997, and some months later the position was filled by Flavia Hodges, a lexicographer with previously published work on the origin and meaning of European surnames and given names, who maintained useful connections in the world of placename research. She took up the role in February 1998 and immediately set about building contacts with the various state nomenclature bodies (attending the annual CGNA meetings in Sydney and Melbourne), with linguists and anthropologists interested in researching Aboriginal placenames, and with many local and community history groups. International links were renewed and strengthened with visits to leading toponymists at the universities of Nottingham, Brighton, Durham and Edinburgh and attendance at the conference of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland in 1998, and attendance at the conferences of the US Council of Geographic Names Authorities (Spokane) and of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (Santiago de Compostela) in 1999. An academic day-conference on Australian placenames of indigenous origin was held at the Australian National University, and work began on designing a database to cover the cultural aspects of Australian toponym to complement those dealing with the technical aspects maintained by the nomenclature authorities.

2000

As a result of the progress made by the pilot project, the Australian Academy of the Humanities was successful in obtaining increased funding from the Australian Research Council which allowed the Australian National Placenames Survey proper to come into being from 1 January, with David Blair as Director and Flavia Hodges as Research Fellow. In addition two newly funded part-time positions were filled from April by Rob Iverach as IT Officer and Susan Poetsch as Research Associate, and Bill Noble retained his connection with the project as honorary Research Associate. Work on the database design was able to begin in earnest, and publication of the quarterly newsletter *Placenames Australia* was begun, as a successor to the series of bulletins distributed by Bill Noble since 1996 that had served to keep alive interest in the possibility of a national survey. A course on placenames was presented at the biennial Australian Linguistic Institute, and a second day-conference on Australian placenames of indigenous origin was held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia (Adelaide).

The ANPS was again represented as an observer at the annual meeting of the US Council for Geographic Names Authorities (St Louis).

2001

After the expansion in 2000, funding in 2001 was much reduced as the Australian Research Council allocated only a relatively small grant to the Australian Academy of the Humanities under its Special Projects fund, which is not intended for the long-term support of ongoing projects. As a result IT Officer Rob Iverach returned to Curtin University of Technology to complete his PhD in geographic information systems and Research Fellow Flavia Hodges moved to part-time involvement. On the positive side, Dale Lehner became an honorary Research Associate in connection with her PhD on the settlement history and placenames of the Darling Downs, and Rob Iverach continued to investigate possibilities for developing the database structure at Curtin University's Department of Computer Science. The first state committee was formed in Western Australia, although it was largely inactive. The Survey was again represented at meetings of the Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia (Darwin) and as an observer at the US Council of Geographic Names Authorities (Boise). A successful application was made to establish an Asia-Pacific Institute for Toponymy at Macquarie University under that institution's Vice Chancellor's Millennium Innovations Fund.

The Institute **membership** consisted of:

- Director Flavia Hodges, who also headed the Technical Toponymy division;
- David Blair, who headed the Historical and Cultural Toponymy division as Director of the Australian National Placenames Survey;
- Susan Poetsch, who headed the Education and Training division;
- Dr Jan Tent of the Department of Linguistics; and
- honorary research associates Dr Dale Lehner, Dr Joyce Miles and William Noble.

The **Management Committee** consisted of:

- the Director, Flavia Hodges;
- the Director of the Australian National Placenames Survey, David Blair;
- the nominee of the Committee for Geographical Names of Australasia, Paul Harcombe (Chief Surveyor of NSW);
- an elected member of the Institute, Susan Poetsch.

The **Advisory Board** consisted of:

- Professor John Loxton, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), nominee of the Vice-Chancellor;
- Professor Christina Slade, Dean of Humanities;
- Associate Professor Richard Braddock, Director of International Relations;

- Pg Hj Matusin Matasan, Surveyor General of Brunei Darussalam and Chair of the Asia South-East & Pacific South-West Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names;
- Helen Kerfoot, Chair of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names;
- Dr Amor Laarabi, Secretary of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names; and
- Roger Payne, Executive Secretary of the United States Board on Geographic Names.

2002-2006

The ANPS now operated under the aegis of the Asia-Pacific Institute for Toponymy at Macquarie University, with base funding secured for a period of five years, and its activities formed the core of APIT's Historical & Cultural Toponymy division (the other divisions being Education & Training, and Technical Toponymy).

In 2002 a second State Committee was established in Victoria; in due course that committee integrated its work into the VICNAMES historical research initiative supervised by the Geographic Place Names Advisory Panel with the Office of Geographic Names, Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning. Joyce Miles, whose doctoral work focused on house names in England, joined the Survey as an honorary Research Associate. A course in placenames was again offered at the biennial Australian Linguistics Institute, and the first undergraduate unit in the subject to be offered at an Australian university was taken by a small number of students. The Survey was represented at meetings of the Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia (Caloundra), where David Blair presented a report on the feasibility of creating a standard terminology of geographic features, and of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (Uppsala). At the end of the year *The Land is a Map: placenames of indigenous origin in Australia*, edited by Luise Hercus, Flavia Hodges & Jane Simpson and consisting mostly of papers from the 1999 and 2000 day-conferences, was published by Pandanus Books in association with Pacific Linguistics. This was very well received and regarded as the foundational scholarly publication in this field.

The year 2003 saw several changes to the APIT personnel. David Blair retired from the Linguistics Department at Macquarie University and took up a position in the Vice-Chancellor's Office, but continued as honorary Director of the ANPS. Susan Poetsch accepted a temporary post with the NSW Office of the Board of Studies to develop the Aboriginal Languages K-10 Syllabus, in which placenames play a significant role. Clair Hill, a former Honours student in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney, joined the ANPS as Research Associate, and Flavia Hodges continued as part-time Research Fellow (as well as being Director of APIT). In this year also, the Survey's website was developed and designed by the University's Centre for Flexible Learning.

Research into NSW Aboriginal placenames was given a significant boost with the establishment of the Aboriginal Language Research and Resource Centre at Tranby College, Glebe, under the direction of Jaky Troy. The third state committee of ANPS was formed, in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. This NSW/ACT Committee of the ANPS and the ALRRC then commenced work with the NSW

Geographical Names Board on proposals for the dual naming of features in Sydney Harbour and an Aboriginal Geographical Naming Strategy.

The Education & Training Division of APIT developed a variety of courses and materials for toponymic training and international outreach. Members of the ANPS team delivered a national training course in toponymy in 2003 and an international one under the auspices of the United Nations Group of Experts in Geographical Names in 2004. Several Aboriginal Languages & Placenames Workshops, in conjunction with the NSW GNB and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, were held to train regional communities in placename research and language retention.

A major task over this five-year period was the design and development of the Survey's database. Greg Windsor of the NSW GNB was responsible for the design of an MS Access relational database; functional improvements to the original design and regular maintenance were the responsibility of David Blair. The database, by the end of this period, held the register data of most States and Territories, imported directly by their naming authorities or via the files of the Gazetteer of Australia. The number of toponym entries at this stage was approximately 250,000.

6 FOURTH PHASE: Placenames Australia, 2007-

When university funding ceased at the end of 2006, Placenames Australia (Inc) was set up as a non-profit voluntary association to carry out the Survey. A meeting at Macquarie University on 18 December 2006 was attended by David Blair, Flavia Hodges, Dale Lehner, Joyce Miles, Bill Noble, Jan Tent, Michael Walsh, Greg Windsor and Colin Yallop, with apologies from Dymphna Lonergan (SA) and Jeff Murray (WA). A constitution incorporating the Model Rules for incorporated associations provided by the NSW Department of Fair Trading was presented to the meeting and was approved for Placenames Australia.

The meeting approved the establishment of a management committee for 2007, in line with the constitution, with the following office-bearers:

President	Colin Yallop
Vice-President	Joyce Miles
Secretary	Jan Tent
Treasurer	Bill Noble
Other Members	Michael Walsh Greg Windsor

The meeting agreed to continue the quarterly publication of the *Placenames Australia* newsletter, which was supported by the NSW Geographical Names Board in its printing and posting.

At the Management Committee's first meeting in 2007 Jan Tent, of Macquarie University's Linguistics Department, was appointed as the first Director of the Survey under the new structure. In 2015 he was succeeded as Director by Dymphna Lonergan of Flinders University, before resuming the role in 2017. Colin Yallop served as inaugural President of PA until 2010; he was succeeded in 2011 by Dale Lehner, by Greg Windsor in 2015, and by Susan Birtles in 2022.

The Management Committee has continued to support the Survey, most recently under Presidents Dale Lehner, Greg Windsor and Susan Birtles, with Helen Slatyer, Brian Lehner and Dale Lehner serving as Secretary, with Charles Koch and Glenn Christie as Treasurer. Funding of the Survey comes from about fifty Supporting Members of PA; most of these send annual donations of \$25, although Placenames Australia has a small number of corporate Members who donate \$250 each year. For many years the Geographical Names Board of NSW provided substantial in-kind support—largely for the printing and distribution of the quarterly newsletter—which was critical until the publication moved to digital-only format in 2019.

Early attempts to establish State Committees for the Survey were not as easy as previously hoped. The most active was the ACT/NSW Committee, chaired by David Blair. It had a dual function: to provide ANPS oversight of placename research within its territory, and to serve as a Technical Sub-Committee of the NSW GNB. In later years the Survey's relationship with the various states and territories was through its affiliation with the Committee for Geographical Names of Australasia. CGNA, as it was then known, was a permanent committee of the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping. Placenames Australia still maintains that relationship with the committee, under its new name of the *Australian and New Zealand Working Group on Place Names*.

The ANPS website in its first iteration was produced by the graphic design office at Macquarie University in 2012. A new website designed in 2018 by a small team of interns from the University's Computing Department then incorporated access to the ANPS Database. In 2025 Stuart Duncan designed a complementary [Placenames Australia website](#) specifically for Placenames Australia (Inc.), intended as the entry point and the prime resource for public enquiry about the work of ANPS. In 2026 a totally fresh [ANPS website](#) was designed by an external provider: a key element within this site is a direct interface to the Survey's Database for accredited researchers to add and edit entries.

7 Publications of the Survey

Alongside the on-going newsletter *Placenames Australia*, the Survey commenced four serial publications in the years after 2007. Although in the long term the Survey's website will be the most widely-accessed source of ANPS data for the public, the Survey staff took the view that themed reports on its research and background papers on its methods were important means of communicating toponymic research. All of these series are e-publications, and all are prepared under the general editorship of David Blair.

Technical Papers

In 2008 the series *Technical Papers* replaced the earlier *Technical Reports* which had been published by APIT. This series presents the background research undertaken by members of the Survey. The papers arise from work on the standardised data model of ANPS, and represent much of the decision-making involved in establishing the principles and processes of the Survey.

Placenames Reports

The first Report in this key series was published in 2014. The *Placenames Reports* series presents the results of toponymic work by researchers of the Survey. All the reports in this Series are based on the principles of ANPS research: that documentation for each placename is recorded, that an interpretation of the placename's origin and history is formed, and that the 'story' of the placenames is presented in an accessible form. Reports are themed, generally (but not exclusively) according to region. The first report, for example, was a chronological survey of the placenames given by James Cook to features on the coast of eastern Australia, while the second and third reports were regional surveys of the Port Macquarie district and of Lord Howe Island.

Occasional Papers

The year 2015 saw the introduction of the Survey's *Occasional Papers*—papers of toponymic interest written by researchers associated with ANPS. The series was introduced to enable the Survey to make available papers which were too substantial to find their place within the pages of the newsletter *Placenames Australia*, but which were nevertheless regarded as being of general interest to readers of that publication.

Data Reports

In 2016 ANPS became aware that the Survey or its associated researchers held records of toponymic data which, although not in the final form which ANPS requires of its *Placename Reports*, nevertheless were likely to be found useful and interesting by toponymists and other researchers. The *Data Reports* series was accordingly instituted as a means of making such data immediately available.

APPENDIX: List of ANPS Directors and Heads of Supporting Bodies

ANPS (Instituted 1 January 2000)		APIT (Instituted 1 November 2001)		PA (Instituted December 2006)	
<i>Director</i>		<i>Director</i>		<i>President</i>	
David Blair	2000-2006	Flavia Hodges	2001-2006		
Jan Tent	2007-2014			Colin Yallop	2007-2010
				Dale Lehner	2011-2014
Dymphna Lonergan	2015-2016			Greg Windsor	2015-2021
Jan Tent	2017-2023			Susan Birtles	2022-
Stuart Duncan	2024-				