



CAIRNS
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

Cairns Historical Society Annual Report 2025

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Introduction

Vision

To be a leading best practice Historical Society and Museum which acknowledges, collects, preserves and disseminates the unique history, culture and heritage of far north Queensland's vibrant and diverse community through discoverable, accessible and engaging experiences.



Mission

- To collect, preserve, conserve and share our collection of archival documents, images and objects that are significant to the history of Cairns and far north Queensland.
- To curate and manage a leading museum and cultural tourism experience in far north Queensland for locals and visitors alike.
- To provide a member-based organisation that is welcoming, vibrant, diverse and inclusive for all members, staff, volunteers, and visitors while providing social benefit to Cairns and the broader far north Queensland community.
- To make accessible and discoverable far north Queensland stories, history and heritage to a global audience by applying creative solutions and remaining adaptive to the digital environment.

Cairns Historical Society

The Cairns Historical Society (the Society) is a member-based organisation, created in 1958 by a small number of local men and women, who shared a vision to collect, protect and make available the north's history to locals and visitors alike.

Since then, it has grown into a well-respected social history repository, which incorporates a 'world-class' Cairns Museum, Research Centre, and Collection.

The Society and Museum operate within four areas: Cairns Museum, Research Centre, Discovery Centre and an active Learn Program.

The Cairns Museum provides an important facility to showcase the collection, disseminate local and regional stories to the public, and provide educational opportunities to the young and those who are young at heart. We play a vital community role in preserving the region's social history, as custodians of the collection, for future generations to benefit from.

With four galleries, a theatrette and original heritage veranda, the Cairns Museum is in a convenient and centrally located facility in the heart of Cairns. We showcase the region's local stories in a state of the art - restored heritage listed building and provide carefully curated Temporary Exhibitions in the Ground Floor Gallery.

With over sixty-seven years' experience as custodians of Cairns history, it is no wonder we are a proud community organisation!

President's Report



Welcome to the 2024–2025 Annual Report and overview of the last 12 months at the Cairns Historical Society and Cairns Museum. I am very pleased to say we have enjoyed another great year at the Society, despite a general tightening of belts in response to uncertain times the community faces across the region.

With 20,729 visitors to the Cairns Museum (including 38% international visitors and 36% national guests); 2,540 children enjoying a visit to the Cairns Museum, History on the Move (trailer) or participation in our school holiday program; 572 overseas students learning about Cairns, and the welcoming of many passengers from some of the 90 cruise ships which docked into Cairns Port, the Society has clearly positioned itself as a convenient and centrally located destination experience for all ages.

Over the last 12 months the Board, Executive Officer and staff have been busy preparing a new strategic plan to take us forward over the next five years. The Strategic Plan 2025–2030 is a well-developed document that serves as a roadmap for our organisation's future and provides a strong focus on membership, creative community engagement and growth while delivering new events and experiences for our locals and visitors alike.

"The Board is committed to taking an innovative and creative approach to growing our organisation through membership and visitation while building on the positive gains made over the last few years."

As Chair, my role is to lead the Board in its governance and provide sound strategic and financial decision making for the organisation. I would like to thank the Executive and Board Directors for their time, enthusiasm and commitment to the Cairns Historical Society throughout the year. I also acknowledge the hard work undertaken by the Executive Officer Dr Sandi Robb, Accounts Manager Debra Ferguson, and their team of dedicated staff, to maintain the highest standard of operations across the Cairns Museum, Research Centre and Collection Care.

There is no doubt our organisation is appreciative of and relies on the Resource and Performance Agreement it has with the Cairns Regional Council. A large thank you goes to the Cairns Regional Council for their support throughout the year including Destry Puia, Director Lifestyle & Community and his team; the teams in Finance and Business Services, as well as Planning, Growth & Sustainability.

In particular, I acknowledge the support of Mayor Amy Eden and the Councillors themselves who approved a generous awarding of 25K to the Cairns Historical Society in early 2025 so that we can deliver an exciting program of events for 2026, Cairns Sesquicentennial Centenary (C150) celebrations.

Thank you goes to our platinum sponsor MacDonnell's Law for their support as well as Parisi Foley Law, Ports North and Cairns Discovery Tours. We are indebted to our Patrons, contract firms and local businesses who continue to support the Society throughout the year.

Finally, I want to express my sincere gratitude to our volunteer members who have given up their personal time to help us over the last 307 days we were open this year. We couldn't do it without your assistance!

Dr Clive Skarott AM, HonDUniv President



Left to Right: Debra Ferguson, Dr Nicky Horsfall, Megan Lilly, President Dr Clive Skarott, Secretary Dr Jan Wegner, Vice President Mark Kamsler, Dr Sarah Collins, Treasurer David Goodman, Karen Oakes, Dr Sandi Robb.

Meet the Board

The Board is composed of esteemed President, Dr Clive Skarott, and eight elected Directors. The Board plays a vital role in guiding the governance, financial oversight, and strategic vision of the organisation.

The Board has four sub-committees: C150, gallery renewal, First Nations, and publishing. With a strong emphasis on delivery, the Board has directed the development of the Strategic Plan for 2025–2030 and has advocated for regional celebrations of the Cairns sesquicentennial anniversary in 2026.

POSITION	NAME	MEETINGS ATTENDED
President	Dr Clive Skarott	7
Vice President	Dr Jan Wegner (resigned October 2024)	2
Vice President	Mark Kamsler	4
Secretary	Lyn Warwick (resigned October 2024)	2
Secretary	Dr Jan Wegner	4
Treasurer	David Goodman	3
Board Member	Dr Nicky Horsfall	7
Board Member	Megan Lilly	6
Board Member	Fiona Jose	1
Board Member	Karen Oakes	4
Board Member	Dr Sarah Collins	5
Executive Officer	Dr Sandi Robb	6
Accounts Manager	Debra Ferguson	5

Board Members in Profile



New Directors

Mark Kamsler, Vice President – elected October 2024

Mark brings strong experience in business operations and a clear understanding of external market pressures. He is focused on supporting effective strategic decision-making to guide the Society's direction.

Dr Sarah Collins, Board Member – elected October 2024

Sarah is a historical archaeologist with deep understanding of North Queensland's heritage. She is committed to sharing this knowledge and engaging the community in understanding the region's past.



Members

Over the past year, the Society has come to understand the significant changes in membership and adapted to meet the challenge of a general decline in numbers and an absence of younger members stepping into the breach as older members step back.

With a consistent 344 members throughout 2024–2025, the Society is squarely facing the challenges of societal change. It is actively responding so the membership base is not left behind. That is why the Society has ensured membership remains the backbone of the organisation and that valuable member benefits such as Bulletin publications, free family activities for members, social invitations to gallery openings and morning tea are sent out regularly, and quality information is posted on digital media and regular newsletters, so connection across the community continues to grow and membership assists the organisation to remain sustainable into the future.

"Membership with the Cairns Historical Society provides a wonderful opportunity for individuals to connect with fellow enthusiasts of history, enjoy a sense of belonging and foster a shared community identity through preserving and promoting an understanding of our own and unique far north Queensland local history."

"Without our members, our community organisation would not be able to survive."

Dr Sandi Rob, Executive Officer



Working Environment

The Cairns Historical Society and Museum consists of a committed group of staff members who are aided by community volunteers.

Dr Sandi Robb, the Executive Officer and Collections Manager, is committed to the development and implementation of long-term objectives and goals while devising an engaging program of strategic initiatives for the future. She is supported by Debra Ferguson, Accounts Manager and Sales, and together they are assisted by their professional team including Shelley Cai, Front of House Coordinator; Gabrielle North, Collections Officer; and Sarah Morgan, Exhibitions Curator.

The Society is fortunate to have a devoted team of 50 volunteers who contribute their time and expertise to the Cairns Museum, Archives, Collection Care, and Learn programs. Their involvement is essential for effectively managing operational areas and educational programs.

I wish we had something as good as this back home in Maitland (NSW). Congratulations to all the volunteers who make this possible.

Maureen, NSW

Through this experience, finally I can understand Cairns culture and society. This museum has a lot of potential values and after I go back to my country, I truly recommend to visit Cairns and the museum.

Sumin Park

Volunteer Contribution

2,835 shifts

14,190 volunteer hours

307 days

Volunteers have contributed \$341,979 in saved wages to the organisation, based on the Fair Work Australia minimum wage.

The Society extends its heartfelt gratitude to all our exceptional volunteers!



Operating Environment

The operating environment at the Cairns Historical Society is dynamic and diverse with a symbiotic connection marking the relationship between the Cairns Museum and the Society.

The Cairns Museum is the public face of the Historical Society. The Museum enables the Society to showcase its collection, tell stories and provide learning experiences to adults, students and children alike.

Through positive visitation numbers, the Cairns Museum provides critical revenue to the Society so it can achieve its core mission: to collect, preserve, conserve and share the collection of archival documents, images and objects that are significant to the history of Cairns and far north Queensland. (Strategic Plan 2025–2030)

The Historical Society, through the Research Centre and Collection repository, provides in house reliable ground-truthing source material for the museum and all operational activities within it.

Key operational areas of business include:

- Cairns Museum
- Ground Floor Gallery
- Reception and Retail shop
- Discovery Centre
- History on the Move Education Program
- Research Centre



Research Centre & Collection

The Cairns Historical Society Research Centre is an outstanding research facility that boasts a remarkable collection of locally, state, and nationally significant archival materials, images, and objects. The collection is made up of three distinct areas, each offering unique significant items:

41,300

archives items including 23,511 digitised records

47,750

images

6,325

objects

Twenty-four volunteers work across four teams at two locations:

- Teams

Research Centre, Archives, Images, Collection Care
- Locations

School of Arts, Edmonton Collection Store

Teams are busy researching, attending to or answering queries from visitors and the general public through electronic requests, providing exhibition support or undertaking archival or collection care duties.

4,178 information requests from the public have been handled over an eight-year period since 2016–2017. That averages out to about 1.2 requests answered each week over the past nine years!

Cairns Historical Society is custodian of far north Queensland’s community history and Cairns memory bank. The strategic goal for the Collection is to enhance accessibility and discoverability for the research and public community; make the collection more accessible online so that it can be accessed anywhere around the world; and provide regional opportunity for knowledge sharing and skills building for other likeminded societies.

YEAR	VISITORS	REQUESTS
2024–2025	190	133
2023–2024	226	222
2022–2023	217	393



Testimonials

I really enjoyed myself yesterday ... and I've just made a list of 37 new search topics, so I will be back!
G Dowling via email 24 September 2024

Thank you so much for helping us with this at such short notice!
S Wiesner, ABC producer of 'Back Roads' via email 11 October 2024

That is gold! Absolutely remarkable, Jan. I am stunned. I am very, very grateful for your prompt response and unearthing this. Really excited. I will dispatch that princely sum [\$3.60] forthwith and look forward to following it up in depth. You have made my week.
T Sandes via email 24 February 2025

Happy to pay for the research fees and to support the Cairns society and their amazing volunteers.
P Magagnoli via email 2 March 2025

Museum

It has been another busy year at the Cairns Museum with visitor numbers remaining steady, and dedicated guides and hosts providing warm welcomes to everyone.

The Cairns Museum is the face of Cairns Historical Society. With five museum galleries, including our Ground Floor Gallery temporary exhibition space, the Cairns Museum offers a unique experience for every visitor.

YEAR	VISITORS
2023-2024	20,729
2022-2023	23,506
2021-2022	22,579
2020-2021	23,733
2019-2020	10,792

Testimonials

Visiting Cairns for the first time from Wellington New Zealand. Very Impressed with this lovely museum. I learned a lot about the history of Cairns. And the verandah is wonderful for sitting and watching the world go by. Thank you!

Trish, Wellington NZ

On my first visit to Cairns at 81. I very much enjoyed seeing the museum, in the charming old building. I was impressed by all the personal stories about Cairns pioneers and influential people

R Wetherall, Melbourne.

Visiting from the UK. A great experience, really enjoyed the displays and feel I learned a lot. The Indigenous exhibition on level 2 brought tears to my eyes.

Teresa, UK

Ground Floor Gallery

The Ground Floor Gallery offers an intimate yet dynamic exhibition space in the heart of Cairns.

July – October 2024

Echoes of the Past

Partnership exhibition with local community group from Mission Beach

November – February 2025

Cats and Dogs: All at Sea and Animals on Board
Travelling Exhibition Australian MuSEAum

March – June 2025

If these walls could talk: Celebrating 45 years Cairns Museum
In-house exhibition

Telling Our Stories

As a not for profit community organisation, the Society places importance on offering members and visitors alike free historical talks and learning opportunities as well as engage with local and international schools and communities.

- 3 Ground Floor Gallery exhibitions
- 3 curatorial talks
- 4 work experience students welcomed (3 local high schools; 1 international)
- 4 industry discussion days and sharing of knowledge: Papua New Guinea artists and community; Zenadth Kes Project Managers from Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies, ANU; Conservators and Collection Managers Queensland Museum; South Australia Health/ Flinders University
- In-house staff/ volunteer training in museums/ significance assessment

Public Lecture Series

Ten free Public Lectures were held at the Cairns Historical Society attracting over 250 members and the public, complete with afternoon tea.

- August** Carol Hardingham: *Alone, but not lonely: visiting the lone graves of the Cairns area*
Dr Sandi Robb: *We commit this body to the ground: Early burials and the Cairns General Cemetery 1876 – 1886*
- October** Dr Sarah Collins: *The Jewish Residents of Smithfield Township 1876-1879*
Dr Jan Wegner: *Why did Mungana really die?*
- February** Carol Hardingham: *Alone, but not lonely: lone graves of Cairns, part II*
Dr Jan Wegner: *A history of Lake Eacham*
- April** Gordon Grimwade: *Chinese Temples in Tropical Australia*
Dr Sarah Collins: *The Inner Route from the artist's point of view: Oswald Brierly on H.M.S. Rattlesnake 1848*
- June** Warren Entsch: *Reflections of the Honourable*
Dr Sandi Robb: *Dragons Dreaming: Aboriginal- Chinese families of north Queensland.*

Learn Program

It is vital that the Society engages with school and student communities to provide quality Learn opportunities aligned to Queensland's Curriculum V.9. The Learn program under the public programs pillar includes: school incursions to the Museum, History in a Trunk, History on the Move trailer excursions to schools, and a fun school holiday museum program.

Guided tours by experienced volunteer guides provide 45 minutes of accurate and interesting local history with free time offered afterwards to enhance the experience through exploration.

The Society encourages the community to learn and become knowledgeable about local history, and understand what makes Cairns unique in the world.

3,111 students reached

1,624 children reached via school visits

747 school students visited the Museum

572 international students visited the Museum

169 children participated in school holiday programs

School Holiday Program

School holidays offer a less structured environment for local children to learn through play and visit the museum while having fun. Seven programs were offered throughout the year.

Spring

Tsikuri Craft

An ancient Japanese folk art with colourful weaving

Summer

Christmas Cuties

Glowing snowmen and pinecone Christmas tree for the family table

Friendship Bracelets

Colourful cotton bracelets made and swapped

Tsikuri Craft

An ancient Japanese folk art with colourful weaving

Easter

Games from Times Past

Classic board games to play and crafting colourful Tic Tac Toe!

Easter Craft

Bunny cards, Easter bracelets and colourful eggs

Winter

Bottle Top Craft

Imaginations ran wild with bottle top ladybugs, beetles, bees, cats and frogs



Online Community

Visitor Satisfaction

The Cairns Historical Society and Cairns Museum are committed to ensuring a positive digital presence to attract visitors to our website and create engaging content across social media platforms. Visitor satisfaction remains high and the Museum has achieved a Best of Queensland Experience 2025 recommended by travellers across the State.



Digital Presence

Traffic acquisition shows strong and growing reliance on search with the website providing a primary touchpoint for visitors to Cairns. Social media continues to play an important role in engaging with far north Queensland local community and families.

Website

Website performance improved significantly year-on-year. Page views grew from 76,151 to 107,596, while active users increased from 31,389 to 38,044. Several historical society and research-related pages also grew in popularity, suggesting expanded interest in deeper content and heritage resources. Our most visited pages continue to reflect visitor interest in the Museum: 40,006 views of the Home page, 11,769 of the Visit page, and 9,007 of the Exhibitions page.

Social media

Content output was intentionally reduced this year (759 posts vs 1,070 last year) to redirect resources towards other activities. Performance remained strong: reach declined only slightly (1,047,175 vs 1,199,705), engagement rose by 8%, and the engagement rate increased from 1.6% to 2.0%. New followers (1,064) and link clicks remained steady, reinforcing the value of quality over quantity and guiding future investment in higher-value channels.



★★★★★ We figured that the city of Cairns and surrounding areas would have an interesting history, and we were delighted with reading and viewing about it at the Cairns Museum. Well presented! The gift shop and staff were lovely as well.

S Cribb

★★★★★ We really enjoyed our time here. It's a relatively small museum that punches above its weight. Packed with wonderful early and local information, that is well laid out and presented. Highly recommended.

Karen Luttrell

Financial Capability

The Cairns Historical Society is dedicated to being a fiscally responsible not for profit organisation that strives to offer a world-class museum and best-practice collection repository for far north Queensland.

It has a clear plan for future capital expenditure in collaboration with the Cairns Regional Council (CRC), underpinned by the Strategic Plan 2025–2030, which supports the Society's objectives.

Priorities 2025–2026

- Implement the new Strategic Plan 2025–2030
- Prepare and negotiate CHS and CRC Resource and Performance Agreement for new four-year agreement commencing 1 July 2026
- Prepare and deliver Cairns sesquicentennial celebration activities 2026
- Prepare Gallery Renewal Scoping documentation in consultation with CRC for tender 2026–2027
- Maintain core budget expectations to meet CRC expectations
- Migrate Collection Management System and develop e-commerce capability
- Grow membership and member benefits suite
- Grow visitation numbers



Grants

Grants are a competitive space with not-for-profit organisations facing increased competition and challenges applying for funds.

During the 2024–2025 period, seven grant applications were developed and submitted, targeting local, state, and national grant opportunities to enhance operational budget needs and support the organisation’s strategic goals and future directions.

Total grant applications	\$130,289
Total amount awarded	\$34,835

GRANT	AMOUNT
Cairns Regional Council Community Partnerships	\$25,000
INTENT: CHS C150 program of events (2026)	
Queensland Gives Community Foundation	\$3,500
INTENT: Manual leg stacker for warehouse collection	
Ports North	\$5,183
INTENT: Maintenance (History on the Move trailer)	
AMaGA	\$1,152
INTENT: Professional development museum conference	

Additional Funds	
Donations	\$14,449
Sponsorship	\$5,183
Fundraising	\$3,072
Total additional external revenue secured	\$52,357

All additional external revenue is directed towards future strategic goals set out in the Strategic Plan 2025–2030.



Patron Membership

As a way to meet the expectations of its philanthropic community, the Cairns Historical Society has a patron program that provides supporters with recognition and visibility through its website, member communications, and the Annual Report.

Three levels of participation:

Gold	\$3,000+
Silver	\$1,500 – \$2,999
Bronze	\$750 – \$1,499

Five strategic areas for patrons to assist:

History on the Move: Educational outreach to schools

Collection Management System: Providing for long term collection management and accessibility

Discovery Centre: Help develop resource kits for Secondary Students or dementia affected community members

Touring Exhibition Program: Assist the Society to develop touring exhibitions and promote our region

Adopt a Shelf: Help upkeep our significant collection, one shelf at a time



The Society acknowledges and expresses gratitude to the Cairns Regional Council and the community, those who have provided in-kind support, and the numerous anonymous benefactors for their generous contributions throughout the year.

Financials

Assets

As at 30 June 2025, total assets were valued at \$2.29 million, which amounted to an increase of approximately \$87k (4.06%) from the previous year.

Income

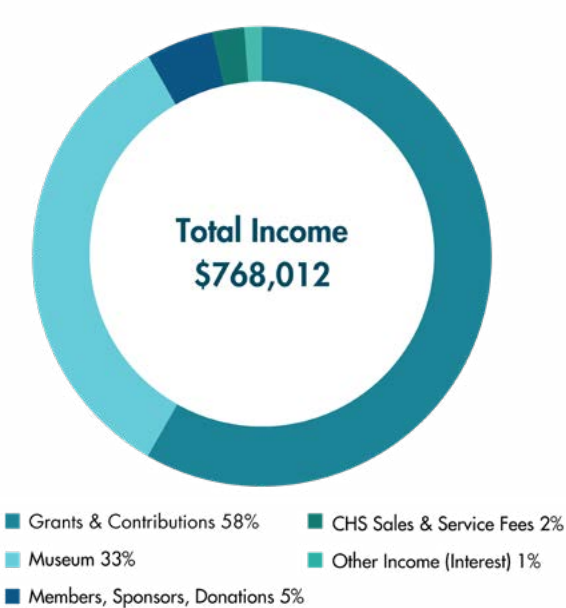
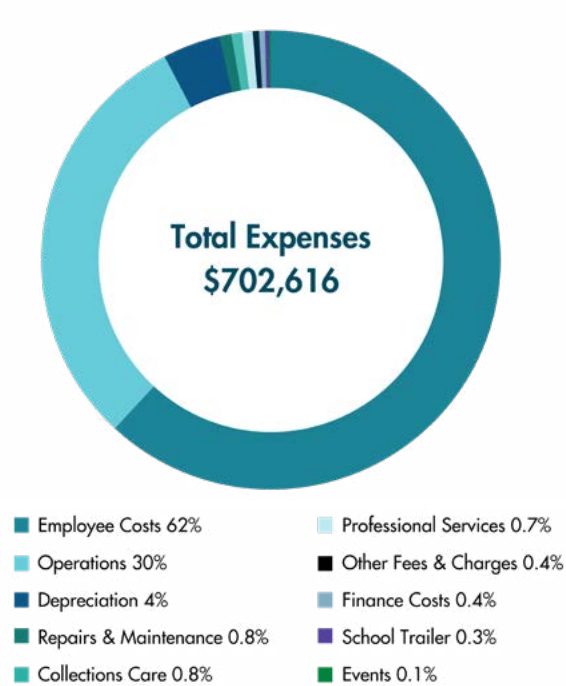
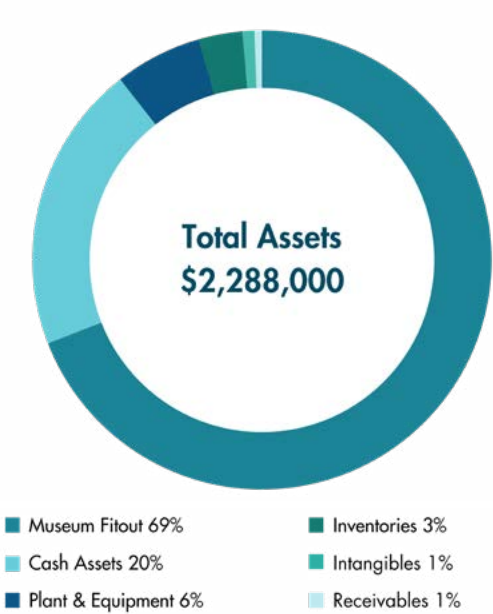
The 2025 financial year saw an increase in an overall income of \$19,731 (2.79%) from the previous year. Despite museum entry for the year being down by \$28,330 this year, there were increases in CRC R&P funding, donations, and government grants.

Expenses

For 2025 financial year, there was decrease in expenses of \$6,268 (-0.96%) from the previous year, largely due to a decrease in employee costs.

Liabilities

As at 30 June 2025, total liabilities were valued at \$1.68 million, an increase of approximately \$22K (1.34%) from the previous year. This movement is due to an increase in employee provisions, accrued expenditure and creditors.





THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS

The Cairns Historical Society could not exist without their generous support.

MACDONNELLS LAW



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