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Geelong’s rousing motoring ‘Revival’

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Introduction

Geelong, the second largest city in the Australian state of Victoria, is situated on scenic Corio Bay about an hour’s drive from Melbourne, the state’s capital. The traditional owners of the land are the indigenous Wathaurong People who called the bay ‘Jillong’ and the surrounding land ‘Corayo’, but new settlers inverted the names that became the City of Geelong and Corio Bay.

By 1850 Geelong was one of Australia’s six main sea ports (Blainey 1966, p. 136) and major discoveries of gold in Ballarat and Bendigo in 1851 brought further prosperity (Blainey 1966, p. 141). Whilst Geelong was situated on Corio Bay with access to potential transport for the gold, Melbourne interests misrepresented the actual distance and claimed that the city was closer to Port Phillip Bay, so Melbourne became Victoria’s state capital, thereby resulting in Geelong being termed ‘Sleepy Hollow’ well into the next century.

Geelong’s history of events since that time was initially framed by the annual agricultural ‘Geelong Show’ and then through its foundation membership of the Victorian Football Association as the Geelong Football Club in 1877. Thirty-nine years later ‘Gala Day’ entered the annual calendar of Geelong events and included a parade acknowledging its broad range of annual achievements; this was later refocussed as primarily a fundraiser for the Geelong Hospital’s Annual Appeal.

Seismic shocks have profoundly affected Geelong’s long-term employment sector in the recent past. Geelong’s major industrial heritage began with Ford USA announcing that its Australian operation would be based in Geelong beginning in 1925, and ended with closure of that plant in 2016. Shell Australia opened its refinery in 1954 and is still operating as Viva Energy Australia after acquisition by Swiss chemical company Vitol in 2014. Alcoa began Geelong aluminium smelter operations in 1963 but also closed in 2014.

Despite the impacts of the Ford and Alcoa closures, there is resilience in Geelong and that is most evident in the development and expansion of its festivals portfolio. Embedded in the expansion is the strategic focus on festivals as a means of engaging the local community through the consolidation of the existing suite of festivals as well as new initiatives to attract visitation and tourism to both the City of Geelong and the nearby Bellarine Peninsula region.
One such initiative has resulted in the installation of five new works of public art that are elements in the revitalisation of central Geelong. It could certainly be argued that such City expenditure on public art could be channelled more effectively into low-cost housing or employment initiatives, for example, but reinvigorating public spaces with sculptural art sends a strong and inclusive message that such spaces are meant to be enjoyed and shared by all, even though the artists’ abstract sculptural forms may challenge some observers. One of the Geelong Council’s recent linking strategies is a new Arts and Culture Trail app that maps a route around the top cultural landmarks of Geelong (McQuillan 2017). A sculpture at the corner of Cunningham St. and Western Beach Road, and very close to the Revival site, is titled ‘Rescue’ and is comprised of seven abstract ‘ships’. McQuillan (p. 32) observed the sculpture is ‘symbolic of the seven continents being pulled from the sea in an act of rescue’, but there was to be no ‘immediate rescue’ of the next two Geelong proposals.

In the Geelong Advertiser editorial titled ‘Tourist drawcard needs support’ (Houlihan 2017) both a proposed Convention Centre adjacent to Deakin University’s Geelong city campus and an adventure park on the waterfront were ‘shelved’ due to lack of state funding. ‘Rescuing’ Geelong was also a focus for former Geelong Mayor and paparazzo Darryn Lyons, who also saw Geelong’s then neglected waterfront as ripe for reinvention. Squires (2016) had earlier observed in the Geelong Advertiser that Lyons’s proposals for a gigantic floating Christmas tree viewable from space and a huge ‘ice-castle’-themed cruise ship pier proved a little too rich for Geelong Council appetites.

Fowles (2017) reported that there have been other recent proposals and developments, including a new $100 million City of Geelong Headquarters, the luxury apartment complexes ‘Miramar’ ($35 million) and ‘The Mercer’ ($45 million), NDIA (National Disability Insurance Scheme) Headquarters ($120 million) and WorkSafe Headquarters ($120 million), and further proposals budgeted at $300 million. Two more modest offerings were the park-side café in the new $45.5 million of the Geelong Library’s ‘Dome’ building and a new accredited farmer’s market in Geelong West’s Pakington Street precinct. Geelong, it seemed, was still abuzz with good vibrations despite the loss of Ford.

Reinvigorating the Geelong Revival Motoring Festival

Moscardo (2007) observed that in the realm of community development there are three major interrelated constructs: social capital, community capacity and community well-being, and whilst the significant development discussed earlier indicates major investment and expenditure, social capital and community well-being are also local government imperatives. The City of Geelong is proud and supportive of one major annual automotive initiative. The three-day Geelong Revival Motoring Festival is located on Geelong’s palm-fringed waterfront precinct and promoted as ‘Australia’s Largest Classic Motoring Festival’.

The roots of the Revival can be traced to the speed trials, or ‘sprints’, that began along the waterfront in 1956 and continued until their ostensible reinvention as the Geelong Revival in 1978. Grant’s detailed study The History of the Geelong Speed Trials 1956–1985 (1986) is a remarkable record of participant recollections, media coverage, organising committees, competitors, awards, and competitor cars and motorcycles. It can be convincingly argued thirty-one years later that the current Revival is an equally memorable experience, offering car races, classic motor show, trade expo, vintage caravans, national vintage fashion awards and vintage boats.

The Revival also offers the benefits of social inclusion through spectating, event participation, experiencing the local automotive legacy (Ford vehicles are always very well
Engaging with the Revival – an autoethnographic approach

Having been born in Geelong, and with a father whose entire career was with the Ford Motor Company of Australia (first in Geelong, then in Melbourne), it seems only fair to declare if not a vested interest then certainly a personal engagement with the focus of this research. Such engagement, however, necessitates a methodology that both permits and validates the authorial participant gaze and ‘voice’ to further illuminate the research context and setting, and autoethnography can achieve just that.

Breathnach (2006) addressed the nature and forms of the relationship between concepts of authenticity and the consumption of heritage attractions, and concluded that ‘The heritage industry peddles an incomplete, inauthentic representation. Individuals’ experience of the past in this context is also, therefore, inauthentic’ (p. 115). Such a critique is, in a very challenging yet obvious way, really only stating that obvious – the past is just that, and any attempts at recreation frequently focus on foregrounding the most attractive and less challenging constructs of what once was. Holloway observed, however, that ‘ethnographers start by ‘experiencing’ the social world of participants before systematic enquiry and examination can begin’ (2010, p. 76), whilst Anderson and Austin investigated what they referred to as ‘auto-ethnography’ in the context of leisure studies and called for ‘a broader academic space for auto-ethnographical integration of the self in qualitative leisure research’ (2012, p. 131). Mackellar investigated participant observation at events, observing that it is ‘suited to many aspects of event research, where a need or desire exists to explore aspects of audience behaviour, but it is especially useful where on-site surveying techniques are inappropriate’ (2013, p. 57).

A final assertion by Holloway on the inductive approach was that ‘researchers do not usually begin the research process with a theory, but with curiosity’ (2010, p. 77) and just such curiosity was what attracted me to my first Geelong Revival in 2015.

Geelong Revival Motoring Festival 2016

On Thursday, May 23, 2013 Ford Australia president Bob Graziano announced that Ford’s Broadmeadows (Melbourne) and Geelong plants would close in October, 2016, putting more than 1000 jobs at risk (ABC News 2013). Geelong had always been a ‘Ford’ town but that’s not to suggest that the usual Ford/GMH/Chrysler rivalries were not in evidence. An earlier closure in Geelong in 2012 had been that of ‘The Ford Discovery Centre’ after thirteen years as one of Geelong’s ‘premier attractions’. The Discovery Centre had displayed a range of Ford vehicles as well as providing related interactive engagement.

Ford Geelong’s closure, coincidentally, took place just prior to the 2016 Geelong Revival, but there was nothing maudlin about that Saturday’s festivities, nor any evidence of animosity – such as targeted protests – at the Revival. It was almost as though the throng attending were determined to participate to the fullest despite the reality of significant unemployment for ex-Ford employees on the horizon. Sharpe, citing Waterman (1998), observed that ‘Festivals are meant to be fun and joyous’ (2008, p. 219), and in 2016 there was abundant evidence of both.
Whilst De Bres and Davis proposed that ‘Festivals can perform a very useful community service, by enhancing both group and place identity’ (2001, p. 327), Derrett suggested that ‘Festivals can reflect the dynamic value systems of individuals united by the same customs, images, collective memory, habits and experiences’ (2003, p. 51). Both perspectives focus on the potential of festivals to nurture beneficial outcomes relating specifically to both the festival location itself as well as benefits accrued through attending and participating.

The cover of the 76-page *Geelong Revival Motoring Festival 2016 Official Event Program* drew attention to the Festival’s sixty years of operation and promised to deliver ‘Twice the Action at Australia’s Largest Classic Motoring Festival!’ Two welcomes were extended to visitors on page 7, the first from the Honourable John Uren, Victoria’s Minister for Tourism and Major Events, and the second from Nicholas Heath, the Event’s Director.

Minister Uren observed in the *Program* that

> World-class events like the Geelong *Revival* Motoring Festival attract visitors from all over Australia and the world, and that’s a big win for nearby businesses. Victoria has something for everyone and the best of everything. That’s why visitors from all over the world have us high on their list of travel destinations. The local area is no exception.

(*Geelong Revival Motoring Festival 2016, p. 7*)

It has taken quite some time for Geelong to shake off its ‘Sleepy Hollow’ epithet, but Uren’s ‘something for everyone and the best of everything’ resonates throughout the many sub-events within the *Revival* as well as the overall festival.

The term ‘revival’ suggests a past phenomenon, experience or object being newly invested with a contemporary energy and thus taking the form of a reawakening or return, examples being neoclassical and neo-Gothic architecture. Frequently embedded in such phenomena are nostalgic yearnings (possibly constructed and/or imagined) for what once was. Chase and Shaw proposed three conditions for nostalgia: (i) a secular and linear sense of time, (ii) the failed present and (iii) evidence of the past (1989, p. 4), and Margalit’s assertion was that nostalgia distorts past reality and idealises its object whilst locating it in a time or purity and innocence (2011, p. 273). Both Chase and Shaw, and Margalit discuss the frequently uncritical and selective approach to the past employed in a range of museum contexts, and whilst the *Revival* is far removed from such curation and regulation its counterpoint is a much more relaxed approach to operation, one that does not distance the past but rather makes it live through a display of cherished vehicles and significant owner and participant enthusiasm.

McClinchey and Carmichael (2010) discussed what they termed ‘The Multi-dimensions of Sense of Place in Cultural Festival Visitor Experiences’. Their model certainly has utility in applied terms for understanding (i) a ‘Nostalgic sense of place and experiences’ (including the neighbourhood’s physical and social setting, the Festival’s physical and social setting, and the collective domain), and (ii) a ‘Potential sense of place and experiences’ in both personal and collective domains (pp. 63–72).

In the personal domain, ‘Neighbourhood Physical and Social Setting’ is the first of three foci in ‘Nostalgic Sense of Place and Experiences’. For the Festival the direct bayside beach location offers both views across Corio Bay and of the recent developments on the foreshore, including apartment blocks, restaurants and some mixed-use buildings. One significant extant building is the ‘Sailors’ Rest’ (1913) that provided accommodation for seamen ashore until 1986. Its electric sign dates from 1926 and is believed to be the oldest remaining electric sign in Victoria. The nostalgic component is further evoked by the historical beachfront,
which offered both small boat and ferry rides, including one that had my late uncle, William ‘Bill’ Watts, known locally as ‘Bill the Boatman’, as proprietor. Despite some development, much of the original 19th- and early 20th-century planting remains in the form of mature Cyprus trees that provide shade for those inclined to picnic.

Further along the beach from the Festival space is the Eastern Beach Reserve with its remarkably intact 1930s red-brick restaurant and changing rooms building as well as a large swimming area enclosed by a similarly 1930s Art Deco – and shark-proof – boardwalk. There is also a smaller pool for younger children learning to swim, your author being one of those who qualified many summers ago. This is also the site where the *Geelong Revival Motoring Festival* quarter-mile sprints are run, with the *Revival Hill Climb* conducted further into Eastern Park.

The second focus is that of the Festival’s physical and social setting, but in light of the immediately preceding discussion it becomes apparent that the Festival operates in a space effectively aligning both McLinchey and Carmichael’s first and second sets of conditions. The third focus, however, is about anticipating future place experiences, and on the basis of 2015 and 2016 authorial participation in the Festival such anticipation is already firmly in place. Unless major changes to the current event format are afoot it seems reasonable to expect the next Festival will utilise its tried-and-true approach but possibly with some fresh automotive content and themed experiences.

McClinchey and Carmichael’s third focus is the collective domain, which interrogates both physical and social space through neighbourhood and festival scales. Beginning with the neighbourhood scale and physical space, issues such as gentrification, public spaces, built heritage and green spaces all are very much in evidence and have already been discussed. The concept and construct of gentrification, however, is particularly relevant here and can be illuminated by a slight detour to a slightly more ‘prestigious’ revival.

Mid-September in the United Kingdom sees ‘The Revival’ staged annually as one event of three days of The Festival of Speed at Goodwood Manor, West Sussex, an event first dating from 1993. A period dress code consists of ‘tweeds and trilbies for men, furs and frocks for the ladies’, and whilst modern cars are not permitted on the circuit on race days, the selection of cars is always engagingly eclectic with both prestige and more prosaic marques on display. Goodwood celebrates both ‘the halcyon days of motor racing and 1940s, ’50s and ’60s glamour’ and is informed by very specific period chic, in terms of both fashion and the automotive experience. However, its location is a privately owned estate that counterpoints the public spaces of the Geelong *Revival*.

The Geelong *Revival*’s premise is equally inclusive and has similarly themed experiences but without Goodwood’s admission costs or exclusivity. Geelong’s scale is also much more modest in comparison, but the participant enthusiasm is, nevertheless, both tangible and contagious. Gyimothy investigated the term ‘amateur spectators’ and concluded that accurately characterising the diverse visitor profile justified further research. Her findings offered an expanded terminology identifying ‘casual observers, connoisseurs and experimentalists’ (2009, p. 177). On the basis of my observations each cohort was well represented at both 2015 and 2016 *Revivals*: those who were casually enjoying the breadth of the display, those who were connoisseurs and enjoying the vehicles but not displaying their own, and the experimentalists for whom it may have been their first visit and were keen to absorb the Revival riches.

In terms of period dress, both 2015 and 2016 Geelong *Revivals* offered the National Vintage Fashion Awards where ‘Old world glamour comes to life’. Lexi DeRock, creator of ‘Yankee Sweetheart Beauty Parlour’, author of *Decades of Style: A Step-By-Step Hair and...*
Makeup Guide – 60s and 70s (2011) and beauty partner of the 2016 Revival, observed in the Official Event Program that ‘there is something for everyone in vintage fashion and it’s a fantastic way to stand out from the crowd while looking totally glamorous’ (2016, pp. 14–15). Needless to say, female fashion has also informed the automotive experience almost from its inception in terms of both inherent and applied design, a phenomenon discussed by Marling, who noted that ‘In the late 1950s, in an effort to appeal to female buyers, the design chief at General Motors actually hired a group of women to produce a fashion show of feminized models for the 1959 season’ (1994, p. 136). Best also explored the ‘glamorous intersection’ of fashion and automobility, observing that ‘fashion, style and automobile classics endure’ (2014, p. 47).

Getz proposed that ‘From the visitor’s perspective, special events present the opportunity to participate in a collective experience which is distinct from everyday life. And because they occur infrequently, or are different each time, novelty is assured’ (1989, p. 125). In the case of the Geelong Revival each year has provided a distinctive experience, particularly in the case of vehicles displayed, although prior to the formal Revival, the primary form of the event was the Geelong Speed Trials. The Geelong Speed Trials 2003 catalogue’s ‘Welcome’ message from Geelong mayor Barbara Abley drew attention to a celebration of Ford’s 100th Anniversary and Ford’s then important role in Geelong’s booming economy.

McClinchey and Carmichael’s personal domain includes both the aforementioned present place experiences as well as ‘two temporal dimensions to sense of place: (i) a reflective state or nostalgia for past place experiences, and (ii) an anticipatory state or the potential for future place experiences’ (2010, p. 63). The ‘reflective state’ was primarily constituted of nostalgic impulses and responses stimulated by the vehicles displayed; the display location, with its historic foreshore of parkland, bay and built heritage; the broadcast music that privileged rock and roll despite the vehicular display reflecting a much broader historical spectrum; and the women’s period clothing that also mainly manifested a 1950s rock and roll vibe. These last two elements suggest two Geelong retail experiences that could also linked in a broader sense to the Revival’s embedded nostalgia.

Mawby (2014) reported on the saving and refurbishing of North Geelong’s Federal Woollen Mills that were transformed ‘from derelict to desirable’ and are now home to the Geelong Vintage Market. The Mills were considered an ‘icon of Geelong’s industrial past’ but had been neglected for years and fallen into significant disrepair. The Vintage Market now specialises in ‘retro chic’, but that term depends, of course, on the eye of the canny beholder.

Sinnott (2017) also observed in a Geelong Advertiser article that there is ‘A vinyl revival sweeping the Geelong region with new figures showing that the phonographic phoenix is rising from the digital ashes’. Independent retailers propose current sales indicate that 2017 will be the best year for record sales in the last thirty years with enthusiasts of all ages choosing music created by the needle in the groove over all other music media forms. Just as the cars of the Revival evoke the alluring automobility of the not-too-distant past, other popular cultural trends in architecture, home décor and appliances, such as record players with 45rpm singles and 33rpm albums, both celebrate and consolidate the nostalgic appeal of the stylus and the vinyl.

The most tangible and popular 2016 Revival experience in terms of both observed crowd engagement and authorial engagement was the Classic Motorshow sponsored by Shannons. Known primarily for classic car auctions and insurance, as of September 2017 Shannons were offering the prize of a Goodwood Revival UK Tour to those obtaining an insurance quote, further consolidating their commitment to the local classic car experience as well as their own suite of products and services.
The Revival’s annual Classic Motorshow is something of an endearing grab bag of festival/event elements, and, unlike most classic car shows and displays, the sequence of vehicles on display is a consequence of arrival time rather than marque order. The photograph on pages 16 and 17 of the 2016 Official Event Program records just such an eclectic line-up, which includes a 1937/38 Ford Model Y sedan, two late 1960s Ford Cortina GTs, a 1955 Plymouth Plaza, a 1956 Dodge Custom Royal and a 1971 Valiant Charger R/T.

Despite the somewhat breathless prose of the 2016 Event Program suggesting perhaps a sense of Pebble Beach, California’s famed Concours d’Elegance in the Revival’s Geelong beachside location, there is genuine engagement evident in both spectator enthusiasm and owners’ pride. It may be a modest event compared to the rest of the world as, in most instances, the vehicles have been driven to the Revival rather than trailered, and when displayed they are rarely roped off, thereby permitting proximity for the spectator. The Revival Program suggested, ‘Get up close and personal with some truly unique cars, chat with the owners, and revel in the magnificent sight that is the Classic Motorshow’ (2016, p. 17). Saleh and Ryan proposed that ‘If a festival is to succeed in its economic or social objectives, it must offer an experience which its clientele finds attractive’ (1993, p. 291), and for me, the next component of the Revival to be discussed did just that.

Adjacent to the automotive display was a temporary caravan park that must have evoked vivid memories for all those who have ever holidayed on wheels. Once a very common sight on summer roads, the caravan was the home away from home and precluded the expense of accommodation costs and restaurant meals. There is evidence to suggest that the caravan now faces competition from cheaper airfares, bargain package deals and the ease of finding new locations rather than relying on the annual holiday at the beach, or in the bush. Googling ‘Geelong caravan parks’ finds fifteen caravan parks listed for Geelong and the nearby Bellarine Peninsula, suggesting that there may be something of a caravan revival underway. The 2016 Revival, however, offered a delightfully nostalgic opportunity to revisit caravan constructs that had more to do with nostalgic imaginings than actually towing a caravan around from site to site.

The ‘caravan park’ at the Revival, however, was on a discrete site across a busy road from the motoring Revival vehicles. This setting effectively framed the caravan display as well evoking a faux-campsite intimacy. Most caravans had a period vehicle in close proximity or in some cases hitched to the tow-car. One striking pair was a blue and white EJ Holden station wagon with a caravan in the same colour scheme, and whilst the caravan exteriors were compelling, the interiors were spectacular. Each one was immaculate with more than a few set up for morning or afternoon tea, appearing as though an historical expert in the field, or a time-traveling aunt or uncle, had been technical adviser for the displays.

There was more than a whiff of nostalgia evident at the caravan ‘park’, and open boot-lids on cars and tailgates on station wagons (period Holdens and Fords, of course) revealed collections of period LP albums, magazines, music memorabilia (The Beatles in particular), cigarette advertising, old soft drink bottles, jigsaw puzzles and so on. Such enthusiasm and extraordinary attention to detail comfortably fits Stebbin’s construct of ‘serious leisure’, where serious leisure is ‘the systematic pursuit of amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity, sufficiently interesting for the participant to find a leisure career’ (1997, p. 17), no doubt a dream come true for ‘exhibitors’ for whom the past resonates more vividly and comfortably than a challenging and potentially less appealing present and future.

A loud broadcast announcement from amongst the display vehicles across the road reminded the throng in attendance that the National Vintage Fashion Awards parade was
about to begin, so Eastern Beach Road was crossed and a position in reasonable proximity to the stage was claimed.

The 2016 Official Event Program describes the awards as ‘Old world glamour comes to life’ and for each of the entrants that was certainly the case, given that they were, political correctness notwithstanding, ‘darling dolls, pin-up beauties and dapper dudes’ (2016, p. 14). Represented were golfers, matrons, models, 1950s glamour pusses, demure misses, army and air force gals, and gangsters and their molls. A late 1960s fashion plate with a beehive hairdo in a pink mini dress, white-framed sunglasses, a white shoulder bag, white patent leather boots and a QANTAS carry-on bag that indicated she’d be up, up, and away in no time at all, and blitzing the competition on the way.

Conclusion

The Geelong Revival Motoring Festival 2016 provided me with an opportunity to engage autoethnographically (Anderson & Austin 2012; Breathnach 2006; Holloway 2010; and MacKellar 2013) with an event that manifested a tangible sense of Geelong’s community well-being and social capital (Moscardo 2007) as well its historically significant automotive heritage. Whilst the focus of the Revival was primarily automotive there was further evidence of a multidimensional dynamic operating in terms of both a sense of place and the constructed event experience. This duality was consistent with McClinchey and Carmichael’s research findings on cultural festival visitor experiences that positively identified with both a nostalgic sense of place as well as a potential sense of place beyond the event experience in both personal and collective domains (2010). Geelong, it seems, continues to consolidate a winning event experience.

References

Geelong Revival Motoring Festival 2016 Official Event Program (no publication or printing information included).


