

John Warden



I don't consider myself an "Oberon Treasure" but more so, my creation, the Oberon Review, which commenced in mid-1984 and was printed for the next 40 years.

I came to Oberon in 1975 with my wife Lyn, who became a teacher at the then Oberon Central School. Our two children, Rick and Kanada were both born in Oberon. I had no other family or relatives in Oberon. I came because I loved the climate ... the colder and snowier the better.

After renting in Buckley Crescent for a short period and learning the lay of the land, I worked out there were much colder and snowier areas within the Shire and we moved to a rented farmhouse midway along the Riverview Forest Road between Black Springs and Shooters Hill, owned by Burt and Jean Hogan. After several years, the opportunity came up to purchase our own home and we moved back into town, to the other end of Buckley Crescent. I remember our next-door neighbours were, on one side, John and Gladys Fahey, and on the other side, Dr. Andrew Godden and wife Carol.

I had moved to Oberon from Bathurst where I had been employed as a printer since moving from Sydney in 1974. After working for Braemar Printing for several years, I decided to start my own printing business in 1979 out of the rear of what was then Howells Arcade.

Oberon Printing & Stationery Supplies was the first printing business in Oberon and, during the very first days of operation, I was provided a huge shot of confidence by one of the town's leading businessmen.

I had never met Shafto Mawhood and as he strolled down through Howells Arcade, I remember thinking he reminded me of "a proper English gentleman". He displayed what appeared a genuine interest in my new venture on this, my first day of operation. After questioning me for some time he welcomed me to the Oberon business scene. He then walked across to his store and returned with a range of various forms, documents, labels etc. Indeed, he had provided me with my first printing jobs, enough to carry me through a couple of weeks of work.

That was the start of a wonderful relationship with S.E. Mawhood & Sons, with Shafto and his sons Ray and John. They even provided finance at one stage through their licenced finance division.

After some months I employed my first part-time employee, Dorothy Fawcett, to help with my office work and printing design layout. Dorothy's daughter Laura was later employed as my first full-time employee.

In the first part of 1984, I happened to bump into Leslie Kurtz whilst walking down Oberon Street. Leslie asked me if I had ever considered printing a newspaper. Leslie's statement to me, "the town really needs a newspaper", stayed with me over the next few weeks and so the seed was sown.

Several years earlier, the town had been served by several editions of a short-running community service club publication, the Lake Oberon Review. The Bathurst-based Western Advocate also published a weekly and or fortnightly Oberon page for a number of years. But there was never a long-running local paper as such until the Oberon Review came along. I had no newspaper

experience and was certainly no journalist ... I could however string a few words together, and I was not trying to compete with the Sydney Morning Herald.

With the printing business progressing and with something to fall back on in case of failure, and after my wife Lyn agreed, it was decided we should make a start. As the Lake Oberon Review had already operated for a handful of editions some years before, it was decided the new newspaper should take its name from that publication and so the Oberon Review was born.

My small printing business at the time did not include anything like the huge presses needed to print a newspaper, so the first thing to do was find a printer. I was in the process of making enquiries when I received a phone call from the editor of the Bathurst Western Advocate, Lou Shehadie, asking questions about my plans. I was a little alarmed by his line of enquiry, given that I was about to provide some sort of opposition to their Oberon page and any subsequent advertising they may have received from local businesses. My concern soon dissipated when Lou suggested the Advocate should print the paper. My first problem was solved.

Although Oberon Printing & Stationery Supplies was not capable of printing the newspaper, we did have the equipment to set the newspaper artwork out, ready for transportation to Bathurst for printing. It was decided the newspaper had to be a paid publication available for purchase at the town's newsagency and I owe a debt of gratitude to the late Roger Arrow and wife Joan for the tremendous support they gave the paper. They paid their invoice on time every week and this guaranteed our survival. Not only that, but they also genuinely believed in the benefits to the community of having a local news source.

In fact, the majority of businesses in town supported the new venture and of particular importance were S.E. Mawhood & Sons and the then Oberon Shire Council, both of whom materially supported the Oberon Review from day one with advertising.

The Oberon population really got on board from the start and there was no shortage of contributing publicity officers from scores of sporting and recreational clubs in the district. I covered the news-gathering side of things, learning as I went along.

Of particular interest to Oberon residents was the reporting of Council matters and I attended every single Oberon Shire Council meeting and, after a name change, the Oberon Council meetings, during my ownership of the newspaper.

As mentioned, Oberon Council were always staunch supporters of the newspaper, so much so they even altered their meeting times to suit my publication deadlines. Council staff always made themselves available and nothing was ever a problem, so far as Council was concerned, in trying to keep the community informed via the pages of the Oberon Review.

The Oberon Review had a number of headquarters over the years. The first edition was produced in a building then owned by Brian and Pam Dellow, in the rooms immediately next to what was then the Oberon Vet Clinic. Over the years we moved several times. The first was to premises immediately across the road, then up the other end of Oberon Street to the former Merv Dwyer-owned Dwyer's Garage, back down Oberon Street to where we had previously been, and then to our long-term home, the former Oberon CWA Hall on the corner of Oberon and Raleigh Streets.

The newspaper continued to survive, and in fact thrive, and I was able to provide employment to a number of locals over the years in fields not normally available in a town the size of Oberon. We had journalists, typesetters, photographers and sales staff, as well as administrative and accounting staff over the years. At our peak we employed around 8 to 10 full-time and part-time

staff. Because of the specialised nature of news-gathering, we even had staff travel daily from Bathurst.

At some point, a number of years after our establishment, a decision was made to publish twice weekly and for a couple years the Oberon Review was available every Wednesday and Friday. But this proved to be unsustainable, and we reverted back to a once-a-week publication.

For the first decade of our existence, we used a number of printers to produce the paper. We started off with the Western Advocate in Bathurst and when they shut their operation we moved onto the Central West Daily at Orange. Both newspapers were owned by the same parent company. I travelled each week, first to Bathurst and then Orange, with our finished artwork. When the Central Daily closed their printing press, it was off to Dubbo to get printed, followed by Richmond, and eventually Port Macquarie.

There was another important side to the operation of the Oberon Review. The Oberon & District Telephone Directory ran for many years and was distributed free of charge to every home in the Oberon Council local government area. The A5-size spiral bound directory contained only local telephone numbers, and I have been told numerous times it was a sought after and valued publication which sat beside most household telephones or in tradies vehicle gloveboxes. The publication was produced in conjunction with the Oberon Business Association and was published annually up until only a couple of years ago. The increasing use of mobile phones and their easy access to phone number contacts spelt the eventual end of the local telephone directory.

In early 1990, I received a phone call from Ross Bryant. Ross had left the Oberon Council in the late 1980s and taken up a position as Shire Clerk on the far north coast, Maclean Shire Council. He started “picking my brains” about how I started the Oberon Review. One thing led to another, and I decided to travel to Maclean and investigate the possibility of starting another newspaper. In July of 1990 the Clarence Valley Review was established, as a direct consequence of the existence of the Oberon Review. Now named the Clarence Valley Independent, with sales from Grafton to Maclean and the coastal towns of Yamba and Iluka, that publication celebrated its 35th birthday this year.

As mentioned, I loved the cold Oberon climate. I remember one particular freezing cold Friday afternoon, I went to get into my old ex-PMG red Holden ute and the door was frozen shut. That got me thinking, it was an unusually cold day and having an interest in the weather, I suspected Saturday morning would be a really freezing cold morning.

I convinced the postmaster, who was the weather reader at the time, to meet me at the weather station in the backyard of the Post Office to take a one-off Saturday reading, as weekend readings were never usually recorded. My suspicions proved correct and the official BOM minimum for that morning was -9.2 Celsius. I am not sure if that record still stands.

When the Post Office was privatised, I made contact with the appropriate people at the Bureau of Meteorology and volunteered my services. Weather readings were taken from my Buckley Crescent address at 9am and 3pm daily (including weekends) until I moved to a small property on the Edith Road near the intersection of the Shooters Hill Road. These readings continued for some years until I eventually left the district.

When I resided on the Edith Road I was contacted by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO). They were charged with setting up an air quality sampling project in and around the Sydney basin, with an initial array of around 30 stations stretching from the Hawkesbury to Wollongong and as far west as Oberon.

ANSTO technicians came up to the property and erected a very impressive box full of gadgets and I was tasked with changing the filters on a vacuum pump twice weekly and posting the filters back to the Lucas Heights ANSTO headquarters for evaluation. As a reward for my efforts, I was provided with the results and readings of the quantity of fine aerosol particles over Oberon, and all the other stations, for the month. I was able to publish the results regularly in the newspaper and therefore prove to the local population that Oberon did in fact have remarkably clean air.

I was aware at the time that there was a problem with ‘fibre fallout’ from the MDF plant but the ANSTO program only collected ‘pure air’, from which aerosol particles and their chemical composition were analysed. So, although there may have been a problem with fibre, there were very few ‘nasty’ chemicals in the air.

The program’s base comparison station at Cape Grim, on the northwest corner of Tasmania, was considered by scientists as being among the cleanest air on the planet. Oberon air quality always came in a clear second to Cape Grim.

My collection of scientific monitoring equipment was about to grow, as I was then contacted by Bathurst City Council who wanted to establish a flood warning station at Oberon. The program involved a number of stations on tributaries to the Fish River, which eventually led into the Macquarie River, to provide early flood warning for Bathurst.

The ANSTO program apparently still runs today but the early phase, which included Oberon, only had a life span of a couple of years. Likewise, the Bathurst City Council eventually closed the Oberon catchment monitoring facility.

I can’t even remember the precise date now, but during the early 2000s I was approached by the Fairfax Newspaper organisation who, at the time, were on a purchasing spree and made an offer on the Oberon Review. I was flat out at the time working between my Oberon and Yamba office and I decided to part ways with the Oberon newspaper. The Oberon Review was taken over and the owners retained some of the staff and the Oberon office for a period. I believe the Oberon Review does not now exist and that chapter from the Oberon history book is now closed.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Oberon, and I loved what the Review was able to achieve during this time. I have learnt that although the local newspapers may not always get it right, you can be sure the news is not fabricated, unlike many of the postings you read on social media.

I now live in the Tasmanian Central Plateau district ... which is blissfully much colder and snowier than Oberon.

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