

Consul-General of Japan in Sydney's Newsletter

No. 68 Custodians of the “spiritual home of Japan-Australia relations”

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**Students from Cowra High School and Seikei High School
at the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries (5 August 2022)**

On 5 August I attended a commemorative service for the 78th anniversary of the Cowra Breakout. Cowra is a small town approximately 310km west of Sydney and 4 hours by car. During World War II, about 1,400 Japanese POWs were detained here, and in 1944 a mass breakout ensued. It was this breakout which claimed the lives of 234 Japanese POWs and 5 Australian servicemen. After the war, a Japanese War Cemetery and Japanese Garden were established, and the town started holding Japan-Australia cultural exchange for high school students and Japanese cultural events. In 2001, the Japanese Ambassador to Australia at the time called Cowra the ["spiritual home of Japan-Australia relations"](#).

In this issue of the Consul-General's Newsletter, I would like to report on my trip to Cowra and share with you my thoughts on the importance of the people who are promoting Japan-Australia exchange in Cowra.



Laying a wreath at the Japanese War Cemetery (5 August 2022)

● Laying wreaths at the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries

In the morning of 5 August, a memorial service was held to commemorate the 78th anniversary of the Cowra Breakout. Among those laying wreaths from the Australian side were the Mayor of Cowra, Cr Bill West, the Deputy Mayor, Cr Judi Smith, the Acting Vice President of the Cowra sub-branch of the Returned Soldier's League (RSL), Lesley Marshall, the President of the Cowra Breakout Association, Gordon Rolls, and the Chair of the Board of Directors for the Cowra Japanese Garden and Culture Centre, Bob Griffiths. From the Japanese side, the current Ambassador of Japan to Australia His Excellency Mr Yamagami Shingo, myself, the Japanese Defense and Air Force Attaché, Col Yasugi Satoshi, and others attended the ceremony to lay wreaths.

This time, something I was delighted to see were the students from Seikei High School on the exchange program at Cowra High School also in attendance laying wreaths. This exchange program was postponed for two years due to COVID-19, and the student who was not able to come during those two years was visiting Cowra for three weeks of her homestay. This year's exchange student had his visit pushed back until this month, and has just started his study abroad which will go until next March. Both students, along with student representatives from Cowra High School, attended the ceremony and offered wreaths, fulfilling their roles as leaders of the next generation for Australia-Japan exchange.



Ambassador Yamagami and Mayor West placing flowers at a cherry tree planted by former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (5 August 2022)

- **Placing flowers at a cherry tree planted by former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo**

After the commemorative ceremony at the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries, Ambassador Yamagami and Mayor West placed flowers at a cherry tree planted by former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo at the former site of the POW camp. I was also in attendance at this event.

This cherry tree was planted by then Prime Minister Abe during his visit to Australia in 2014, when he delivered a speech to the Parliament in Canberra. Although he could not come to Cowra himself, he ordered the tree to be planted, and the name of former Prime Minister Abe was engraved on the nameplate.

Both the [Japanese media](#) and [Australian media](#) covered the event, and Ambassador Yamagami and Mayor West were interviewed. I felt that the high level of media interest reflected the significant contribution that former Prime Minister Abe made to furthering Australia-Japan relations.



The Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre (5 August 2022)

- **Morning tea at the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre**

After that, a morning tea was held at the [Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre](#). I was able to have a friendly chat with the many people who attended the ceremony and listened to the remarks by Mayor West, Ambassador

Yamagami, and President Rolls of the Cowra Breakout Association.

I was also able to speak with the student from Seikei High School on her three-week visit to Cowra after being delayed for 2 years. She told me enthusiastically that throughout her stay in Cowra for three weeks she wanted to learn so many things, even though she could not participate in the exchange program to her regret.

After the morning tea, I walked around the Japanese garden with the newly appointed Vice-Consul Tateno on her first time coming to Cowra. Blessed with fine weather and the always beautiful scenery, we could feel the warmth of the people who first landscaped this garden and cared for it over the years since then.

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With the author of a picture book on the Cowra Breakout, Lusi Austin
(4 August 2022)

- **A picture book on the Cowra Breakout**

On this excursion, I had a unique opportunity to talk with the people who were responsible for organising various commemorative events and ceremonies and for managing related facilities in Cowra. These included members of the Cowra Breakout Association, the administrator of the POW camp site, the administrator and gardener of the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre. I met them one day before the ceremony and expressed my gratitude. I also would like to take this opportunity to thank Lawrance Ryan of the Cowra Breakout Association. He is instrumental to the coordination of the commemorative services each year.

At that time, I was given [a children's picture book about the Cowra Breakout](#) which was published last December by a public relations officer of the Cowra Breakout Association, Lusi Austin. Living in Cowra, when she wanted to explain the Cowra Breakout to her children, there were no good resources so she applied for and won grants so that she could publish the book herself. I was

greatly impressed by the fact that new projects are still taking place.

This picture book, titled “Jack’s visit to Cowra”, focusses on a grandfather telling his grandson about the Cowra Breakout. “Two countries that were once at war with each other ended up becoming friends because of the kindness that happened in Cowra” is a quote that explains the role that Cowra played in the reconciliation between Australia and Japan.



The vineyards at Rosnay Organic Wines (5 August 2022)

● Wineries of the Cowra Region

Cowra is well-known as a region for producing wine. On the way back from a series of prior events, I visited a winery north of Cowra called [Rosnay Organic Wines](#) in Canowindra. On a previous trip to Cowra, I was introduced to this winery’s sparkling wine as a local wine. For two years, while offering this wine at my residence I have used it to explain the link between Cowra and Japan. I wanted to express my gratitude to the people at the winery and hear their story.

I was given a tour of the vineyards and the production facilities by the General Manager, Sam Statham. On the farm they were also producing figs and olives, with solar panels and batteries to conserve electricity. Bottling was done by hand in the factory, with the labels using pictures drawn by his parents and children. They were making brilliant handmade products while also enjoying the process.

While learning about the history of Cowra, I felt that introducing this kind of local Australian life and industry to Japan would deepen mutual understanding between Australia and Japan.



**A student from the 1988-89 Cowra High School exchange program
Alison Starr (left) Cowra Deputy Mayor Judi Smith (right) and myself
(5 August 2022)**

● **Custodians of the “spiritual home of Japan-Australia relations”**

This visit to Cowra was my fourth such trip. The first time was in [June of 2020](#) after the first wave of COVID-19. The next trip was in that September, and

although the Sakura Matsuri (Cherry Blossom Festival) was cancelled, I visited with President Ishikawa of the Japanese Society of Sydney, and laid wreaths. The third time was for the Koyo Matsuri (Autumn Festival) in [May of 2022](#). Then, this time I was able to attend the commemorative event for the Cowra Breakout for the first time on 5 August.

I have seen the former POW camp, the Australia and Japanese War Cemeteries, the Japanese garden, and cherry trees planted in Cowra, and I summarised the long history of these sites in the Consul General's newsletter "[Cowra as a bridge between Australia and Japan](#)" in July 2020. However, after meeting more people during my visit to Cowra this time, I strongly felt that it is the "people" who support these "objects".

Deputy Mayor Smith, who laid wreaths with me at the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries, is the second generation Japanese language teacher since Cowra High School started its exchange program with Seikei High School in 1970, and has been responsible for the implementation of the program for many years. At the ceremony, Alison Starr who learnt Japanese from Deputy Mayor Smith and participated on the 1988-89 exchange program as well as the Seikei High School students who just arrived also laid wreaths. Deputy Mayor Smith will visit Japan next year as a member of a delegation from Cowra and plans to visit Seikei High School.

I felt that it is the warmth of the people of Cowra, who are responsible for conducting various ceremonies and events and undertaking various exchanges, that has created a story of loving exchange, remembering the history of Australia and Japan from the wartime, the post-war period to the present day. It is important to express our heartfelt appreciation to the people of Cowra and to keep supporting their activities. This is this conviction that I would like to pass on to my colleagues and my successor.

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