

VFMC Woolshed Ball Guidelines

Background

The Woolshed Ball is the VFMC's premier dance event. Back in the 1980s, when Maree and I joined the VFMC, these Balls attracted more than a hundred guests, most dressed in Colonial attire. The halls were large heritage venues such as Central Hall in Fitzroy and the Collingwood Town Hall. The bands were generally highly regarded groups such as Peter Ellis's Emu Creek Band and occasionally the Gay Charmers or the Wedderburn Old-Timers. The Billabong Band was not considered up to the standard required for the more traditional quadrilles and couples dances, but we were occasionally given the period after supper to do the 'Irish' sets, which the old-time bands didn't generally want to or know how to play. As the Balls usually went for 4 hours or more, the Billabong Band was occasionally used as a 'relief' band to give the main band a break. Most of the couples who attended were experienced dancers who had grown with the popularity of heritage dancing. Tables were provided and groups of VFMC members generally booked several.

As interest in heritage dancing started to wane after the dance revival of the 1970s, and financial constraints (such as insurance costs and rising hall hire rates) started to interfere with the staging of our dances, a number of measures were implemented to enable us to continue putting them on. We couldn't afford the usual bands, so the Billabong Band was hired at about half the cost of the others. We gradually moved to halls in outer suburbs to reduce hall hire and because we were unable to fill the larger halls. We also dropped the October Ball. Prior to COVID, we had moved to the Kilsyth hall, which is large enough and cheap enough but the location is a bit far for many of the inner city dancers to want to travel to.

In 2024, we held our May Woolshed Ball at the Box Hill Community Arts Centre. The more central location together with a post-COVID resurgence of interest in traditional Australian dancing made this a successful event that we can build on for the future.

Timing

The usual dates for the Woolshed Balls are:

- 4th Saturday in May
- 2nd Saturday in May

The intention is to revive the October Ball in 2025.

Planning

To ensure availability of halls and bands, planning needs to commence several months before the actual event. This means no later than January for the May Ball, and no later than June for the October Ball, although it is better if the hall and band can be sorted out as early as possible. If we are using the Billabong Band, this just means alerting the

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Billabong Band convenor of the upcoming events. Planning should include the date for the following ball as well, so that it can be announced at the next ball and included in the website database for smooth transition after the next ball is over.

Hall requirements

When checking out possible halls for the balls, we need to apply the following criteria:

1. Location: preferably central to the Eastern suburbs
2. Hire cost: depends on our budget, which depends on the expected number of dancers
3. Size: needs to be big enough to accommodate the expected number of dancers, preferably with room for tables to seat them between brackets
4. Band space: preferably a separate stage big enough to accommodate 6-10 musicians, with space for the PA and speakers etc
5. Easy access to the stage or band end of the hall, with parking for the sound engineer and the person transporting the PA system
6. Supper space: kitchen facilities for at least tea and coffee, space for guests to consume their basket suppers that they bring (tables in the main hall are preferable if there is space)
7. Accessible toilets: must be accessible for guests with impaired mobility, including wheelchair access.
8. Parking spaces: preferably on-site.
9. Public transport access: not essential, but a plus if it exists.
10. Availability during the time required, including setting up and knockdown time, and clearance for an event involving use of a PA system (although we are pretty quiet by some standards, some councils have blanket rules regarding use of PA systems beyond specified hours).

Band

For the time being we expect to be using the Billabong Band, but we should consider other suitable bands, such as Blackberry Jam or the Melbourne Colonial Dance Band.

Dance program

The program for these balls is important – it needs to be varied enough and challenging enough for the experienced dancers, but it should contain enough easier dances to cater for any newbies who are encouraged to attend via our promotion of the event at our monthly Ringwood Family Dances or other events. It should also have regard to the programs for dances at other clubs, to ensure consistency and avoid repetition. In 2024, Robin Simpson and Jane Bullock generally put the program together.

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We also need to line up dance callers – we usually have three or four so that each caller gets an opportunity to dance during the night. We also appoint a MC for the night (the MC often calls some of the dances as well).

Once the dance program has been drafted, and assuming that the Billabong Band will be playing, a music program needs to be put together and made available on the club website for easy access by the Billabong Band musicians. Scheduling of Band practices is generally left to the Band convenor, although we usually try to have one of the callers attend at least one practice to ensure the Band knows the preferred tempos and that the chosen music will work with the dance calls.

Ticketing and promotion

For the Woolshed Balls, we need to have a reasonable expectation regarding the numbers that will attend, so ticketing is geared towards pre-booking, either via Humanitix (preferred) or cash sales at our other events. Accordingly, we offer a discount for pre-booked tickets, with a significant mark-up for tickets bought at the door on the night. Where hall space is limited, we could consider making tickets available for pre-booking only.

For the 2024 May Ball we charged \$20 for members pre-booked, \$25 for non-members pre-booked and \$30 at the door (members and non-members).

For the 2025 Balls, we will need to have a better system for cash sales of pre-booked tickets. Most of these are sold by Jane Bullock at other (non-VFMC) club events, with a few being sold at our Ringwood dance. In 2024 we used ‘raffle ticket’ style ticket books with carbon copy records, but this wasn’t fail safe. It would be better to issue (say) an A5 printed ticket with a stub to keep for our records stating name(s) and type(s) of ticket sold, rather than relying on the sellers to remember to record this information.

The Balls are generally promoted via posters and flyers at our other events (concerts, sessions and Ringwood dances), posters and flyers at events run by other clubs (e.g. the Melbourne Colonial Dancers) and via our Facebook page and website. We also used the Whitehorse Council website for promoting the 2024 May Ball (Box Hill is in the city of Whitehorse).

PA system

We generally use one of the VFMC PA systems, currently being stored at Steve Bullock’s house and set up by him. We prefer to have a dedicated sound engineer to manage the balance during the night, from a separate engineer’s desk located in a position where the engineer can hear the balance in the hall. Sue Harriage has been our preferred sound engineer over the last few Balls. We need to have access to the hall with sufficient time to set up the system and other items (chairs, decorations, tables, supper facilities etc).

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Decorations etc

There are a number of things relating to the Balls that are stored at Fort Knox and the Senior Citizen's Hall and need to be collected before the event, brought to the hall and taken back afterwards:

1. The dance cards and easel to show the next dances coming up
2. Tea and coffee (from the monthly Ringwood dance)
3. VFMC canvas banners (the large one is very heavy and only suitable to hang along the front of a raised stage). I believe these were originally painted by Bette Davis' daughter.
4. Pictures in a big brown paper artist bag
5. Bag of stuffed toy sheep (assuming no other theme – perhaps we should bring back different themes for each ball?).

Ball checklist

The following checklists may be of use to make sure all the relevant information is available to anyone involved in the event:

Planning checklist:

Date of Ball:	[date]
Start time:	[time]
Finish time:	[time]
Hall address:	[street address]
Hall contact:	[name, phone, email]
Hall fee:	[\$ amount]
Hall access from:	[time]
Hall access to:	[time]
Band:	[Band name]
Band contact:	[name, phone, email]
Band fee:	[\$ amount] *
Sound engineer:	[name]
Sound engineer's fee	[\$ amount] *
MC:	[name]
Callers:	[names]
Opening hall / setting up:	[names]
Fetching things from Fort Knox:	[name(s)]
Cleaning up / locking hall	[name(s)]

* Fees for Billabong Band and Sound engineer have been around \$500 and \$50. Callers are not paid; MC gets a free ticket plus one for the MC's partner if applicable.

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Convenor's checklist:

Task	Tick when complete
Check hall availability and choose preferred hall	
Draft budget for the event	
Book the hall	
Book the band	
Book the sound engineer	
Book the PA system and arrange someone to transport it, set it up and take it away	
Write and agree dance program	
Choose and collect suitable music for the program. If other band (not Billabong) help with choosing music	
Book the MC	
Book the callers	
Set up Humanitix event and tickets	
Create cash ticketing system and distribute tickets	
Post dance program and music on Club website	
Draft and agree poster for the event	
Print posters / flyers	
Put flyer on club website	
Create Facebook event (closer to event date)	
Arrange for volunteers to set up and knockdown	
Arrange for volunteers to manage supper and clean up	
Ensure there are volunteers to man the door	
Ensure cash box and Square terminal are brought	
Ensure we have flyers and advertising for other events	
Collect items from Fort Knox	
Take items back to Fort Knox	
Prepare financial summary of event	
Lodge financial summary with Treasurer	
Debrief and report to Committee	

Bill Buttler

18 November 2024