



Bowral resident Melissa McShane in the NSW State Library researching the origins of Mary Poppins. She and her father Paul believe the character was created in Bowral.

Picture: JAMES BRICKWOOD

A push for Poppins

Exactly 100 years ago last week, the character of Mary Poppins was born in Bowral. Or so the organisers of an appeal to erect a statue to the famous nanny believe, writes WILLIAM VERITY.

MARY POPPINS MAY BE AN ENGLISH icon but a few Bowral residents reckon she was born in the Southern Highlands.

The nanny made famous by Julie Andrews in the 1964 Disney film was actually the creation of PL Travers, an Australian author who spent a chunk of her childhood living in the Southern Highlands.

It was a golden age for Bowral in the early 20th century, and particularly for Holly St, where Travers lived just a few doors down from the town's most famous son, Donald Bradman.

There is a theory - and it is only a theory - that Travers, then known as Helen Lyndon Goff, came up with the Poppins character while living in Bowral, and before moving to England, where she spent her adult life.

Travers was 10 or 11 years old at the time, and her family was in deep grief after the loss of her father, forcing her mother and three daughters to move to NSW and rely on the charity of their rich aunt, Ellie Morehead.

The story is taken up by Paul McShane, a former Bulli resident who is spearheading a campaign to raise around \$80,000 to have a Mary Poppins statue erected in Glebe Park, Bowral.



"One evening, on a day marked by a heavy downpour of rain, her mother ran from their house in Holly St in a tremendously anxious state," McShane explained.

"She declared that she was going to drown herself in the creek that passed near the back of the property.

"This naturally alarmed Lyndon [Travers] and her sisters.

"But instead of panicking and making her younger sisters even more anxious, Lyndon did something that was perhaps a portent to her future.

"To calm the anxious girls, even while fearful herself, she gathered them around the fire and told them a story of her own creation, about a magical white horse."

McShane believes the incident is certainly the birth of Travers as a storyteller, but it may be even more significant.

The link between this key event in the author's childhood and her most famous creation comes much later - in a letter she



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wrote to a Scandinavian academic, Staffen Bergsten, in 1977.

"I have often wondered," Travers wrote, "whether he [the magical horse], running underground, came up eventually as Mary Poppins."

The link may be tenuous, but it's strong enough for McShane, an online bookseller and creator of the Booktown and Booktrail concept that seeks to brand Bowral and the Highlands as a literary tourist destination.

He has secured the support of the local council and will tomorrow hold a sing-along screening of *Mary Poppins* at the Empire

Cinema to start the fundraising drive.

The event will also reveal details of a creative writing competition funded by the Travers estate.

Key to the initiative has been McShane's daughter, Melissa, who helped submit a plan to redesign the town's central pedestrian precinct - Corbett Plaza - when she was still in primary school.

This was after she had joined friends to create chalk art in the plaza and recreating a scene in the movie, when Poppins and her children dive into a pavement drawing.

"The story means the magic and excitement of childhood," Melissa, now 18, said. "It brings adults back to their childhood and it opens up new worlds for children."

Bowral is not the only Australian town to lay claim to Poppins tourist potential.

Maryborough in Queensland proudly - and accurately - proclaims itself as the author's birthplace in 1899 and has hosted a Poppins festival for some years.

The move by Bowral to claim Poppins has sparked a reaction from the town and both national and international headlines.

"We don't discredit the fact that PL Travers lived in Bowral, but we are the founders of the festival," one Maryborough councillor told the UK *Telegraph*.

McShane countered with the observation that Travers spent more time in Bowral than anywhere else in Australia.

He said the Poppins story was about a dysfunctional family with an absent father and a distracted mother and that those conditions existed in Travers' family by the time she was in Bowral.

"We would like to take it a bit further," McShane said. "This idea of umbrellas at 10 paces has potential."

■ Bookings are essential for the screening of *Mary Poppins* at the Empire Cinema, Bowral, tomorrow at 2.15pm. Details: 4861 4676



Melissa McShane recreates Mary Poppins' preferred mode of travel.