

The coming of suburbia

In the 1910s there were four villages in Sutherland Shire: Cronulla, a holiday resort and residential suburb; the administrative centre of Sutherland; the rural hub of Miranda; and Caringbah located on two transport links.

Religion contributed to suburban development, with some suburbs becoming 'Bible belts' where Evangelical Christians predominated. While Sutherland Shire has traditionally been strongly Protestant and 'Anglo', a higher percentage of Catholics now live in the district than previously.

In the booming 1920s, land subdivisions surged, mainly near transport routes. Then after slow growth during the 1930s depression and virtually no home building in World War II, Sutherland Shire's population exploded in the post-war years.

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Two of the old but new suburbs of Sutherland Shire are highlighted here. As time passes other suburbs will be featured, all of which have their own distinct stories of joy and sometimes heartache.

In the boom years of the 1920s, while Cronulla was morphing from a village to a flourishing holiday resort and residential suburb, land subdivisions proceeded steadily in other parts of Sutherland Shire. In these years the first steps in creating suburbs from vacant and/or farm land took place at Caringbah, Loftus, Gymea, Gymea Bay, Oyster Bay, Jannali, Woronora, Heathcote, Grays Point, Sylvania, Kurnell and Como. As few people owned cars, proximity to transport routes was vital for suburban development, and in areas without access to efficient public transport, land was slow to sell.

After slow growth during the depression years and virtually no home building in World War II, Sutherland Shire's population surged in the post-war years. It increased from 29 184 in 1947 to 65 757 in 1954. By 1966 it was 134 058, and continued to increase, although not at the same rate. By 2001 there were 203 089 residents in Sutherland Shire, but this continued population growth was now lower than the Sydney mean.

In his examination of the origins of Australians' love/hate relationship with suburbia, historian Graeme Davison has discussed the way in which religion contributed to suburban development. Suburbs often became 'Bible belts' with Evangelical Christians predominating. While Sutherland Shire has traditionally been strongly Protestant – and 'Anglo' – a higher percentage of Catholics now live in the district than previously.

Caringbah

Caringbah shopping centre began to expand in the 1920s as rural land along the route of the tramline was subdivided. Joe Monro had auctioned Frank Cridland's Sunnyside Estate – bounded by Cawarra, Banksia and Willarong Roads and Dianella Street – in 1915. The popular Sunnyside Wine Café was on the market at the same time. Caringbah's location on the Taren Point route to Sydney also accelerated its development. By 1925 there were sufficient children in the area to warrant opening a school.

Born in 1919, Nancy Regan had idyllic memories of growing up in Caringbah:

The wildflowers were something to remember. There wasn't a native flower that we as children didn't know of – lovely Boronia, waratahs, native rose and beautiful heath. We used to love to pick gum tips for the house.

In this developing suburb, bushland was still close by: it remained central to the lives of the children of the 1920s, and in some cases those of the 1950s.

Writer and political activist Mena Calthorpe (1905–1996) who, with her husband Bill built a house in Caringbah in the 1950s was part of this population surge in the post-war years:

If you had a few pounds lying idle you should have come to Caringbah in 1950. Plenty of open space! Gumtrees blooming in the paddocks and flower farms and vegetable gardens almost in the main street.

Delayed by the War in starting their families, Sutherland Shire's new residents chased the dream, actively encouraged by government, of home ownership on a quarter-acre block. Many of the comfortable but modest homes built in the early post-war years still remain.

Vi and Jeff Aldridge moved to Caringbah in 1948. Jeff, a railway worker from Temora and Vi, brought up in Ultimo, chose land in Actinotus Street, where there was plenty of vacant blocks. A track that Lilli Pilli residents used as a short cut to Caringbah station traversed the block. Numerous tree stumps were a forlorn reminder of an earlier forest. With the help of Jeff's mates these were soon grubbed out. Mounds of rubbish were cleared, and deposited in a deep pit on the corner of the block.

Although they lived in a tent for the first few months until a 'temporary' garage was built, Vi loved life in the fresh clean air. When she visited her mother in Harris Street, Ultimo to proudly show off her new baby, Vi noticed that the nappies washed in Ultimo were grey, in contrast to those laundered in the uncontaminated air of Actinotus Street.

Jeannette and Richmond Manyweathers settled in Babbin Place, Caringbah the mid-1950s. English construction company Taylor Woodrow had built 25 brick houses there on land that had been two small adjoining farms. The street was soon occupied with mostly young married couples who produced families and led quiet lives centred, in Jeannette's words, 'on young children, gardens, work, sometimes sport and the life of the street'.

Engadine/ Yarrawarra

Located on a ridge south of Sutherland, Crown land was subdivided at Engadine in 1911, marking the official beginning of the village. A handful of returned soldiers settled there during World War I, and by 1920 there were 49 residents. Frustrated at seeing trains regularly go past but not stop, they paid to have a station constructed. Nevertheless, settlement was slow and it was not until 1932 that Engadine became large enough to have a school.

English migrant Travice de Witt, with his wife Elizabeth, walked off their orchard at Griffith the day they received a bill for cartage, but no payment, on a consignment of apricots sent to the Sydney markets. On the advice of Travice's World War I Light Horse mate, Doug Buckle, who had married into an Engadine family, the de Witts settled in Engadine at Christmas time in 1930.

Betty de Witt (b. 1923) recalled how 'it was all bush, tracks and snakes' around their new home. One of Travice's first jobs was to clear an access road – now Ferntree Road – from Woronora Road to their home in Ridge Road, as an escape route in case of bushfires. Even though Travice was out of work for five years he was ineligible for dole payments or relief work, as he had not exhausted his financial reserves. With a large vegetable garden and a menagerie of animals such as chooks, ducks, geese, pigs, horses and cows, the family of necessity became virtually self-sufficient on their six-acre block.

The de Witts were just one of the families 'doing it tough' who put down roots in this part of Sutherland Shire. In 1932 unemployed people from the inner city settled on Crown Land just north of Engadine in what is now Yarrawarrah. They were each given £10 worth of building materials and later a grant of £1000 was provided for relief work to build an access road.

In her memoirs Jessie Macaskill (b. 1896) recalled how when the family moved to Engadine they lived in the two rooms that her husband Ken and his mates built:

We all got busy right away to fell the trees, chopped them up for firewood and dug the ground as we cleared it and put vegetables in. The first crop we got was terrific. We never had anything as good. Afterwards when my husband cleared enough for vegies; he cleared a paddock and fenced it so we got a cow.

A 'large army of unemployed' drifted into the Shire from other parts of the city, partly for the chance of obtaining relief work, but also it was a pleasant place to live. When the NSW government wished to trial a new relief scheme, they asked Sutherland Shire to participate because there were so many unemployed people in the district.

In 1948 Engadine had a population of about 1000, but it was not until the 1960s that this began to grow rapidly. At that time, land formerly reserved in the Green Belt was offered for sale in the Engadine area.

Married in 1961 while NSW was in the grip of a credit squeeze, electrician Les Madden and hairdresser Coral Blizzard 'didn't have a brass razoo' and found a temporary home in a garage in Water Street, Caringbah. Nineteen-year-old Coral was soon pregnant and when they heard in 1962 that there was to be a ballot for Crown land at Loftus and Engadine, they submitted three applications – one in each of their names and one jointly. Although theoretically this was not permitted, they managed to obtain Coral's last preference, Lot 4 in Laurina Avenue, Engadine, now part of the suburb of Yarrawarrah.

This release of suburban lots of Crown land suited their financial situation. Instead of having to buy land, those drawn out in the ballot obtained a perpetual lease on which a small annual rent was paid. Later in the 1970s – like others with leasehold land – they converted to freehold. In January 1963 Coral was called to appear before a Local Land Board hearing in Macquarie Street to show that she had the 'financial ability to erect a dwelling on the land.' She didn't, but with the help of temporary loans from relations and friends she and Les had enough in the bank to obtain a building society loan.

Les was now an owner-builder and with the help of fellow tradesmen, built their house. They could only afford bricks for the foundations and so erected a house of 'log cabin fibro', since bricked over and extended.

In 1963, they moved in and soon made friends with their neighbours. Although Coral was thrilled to have her own place, she recalls how arduous shopping was. As Les needed the car for work, and groceries were not delivered, once a week she wheeled the pram to Engadine station and boarded the rail motor. At Sutherland she struggled up the steps and changed platforms, before travelling to Peakhurst where she shopped with her mother-in-

law. Together they would wrangle groceries, babies and pram to the Madden house where Coral waited until Les collected her after work. It wasn't easy but they managed.

Although Les was working hard, he was in heaven, and recalled how he felt they had 'won the lottery twice': when they obtained the land in the ballot and because Laurina Avenue was such 'an amiable area'. Here children grew up together, playing cricket on the dirt road where few cars were ever seen.

Residents in the street were 'all struggling together' and, unable to afford outside entertainment, organised street parties. The children were put to bed and a parent did regular patrols to check on them. Bonfires were held on the large block of reserve land immediately west of the street and after these were no longer permitted, communal Christmas carol singing continued. A block on the corner of Laurina Avenue and Old Bush Road had been reserved for public purposes, so the men cleared the land and built the Yarrawarra Community Centre there in 1965. Twenty years later Sutherland Shire Council replaced this with a more modern facility.

When this influx of new settlers arrived in the early 1960s there were a few older residents who had been in the area since depression days. An elderly man lived in a stone house on the reserve for many years, and Les chuckled when he recalled that those who lived in 'humpies' in Old Bush Road regarded him and his fellow Laurina Avenue residents as 'silvertails', despite their frugal lifestyle.

With the subdivision of land off Lantana Road, Engadine in 1966, settlement moved into steeper terrain further from public transport. This was also the case in a NSW Department of Lands Crown land subdivision in 1969 south of Forbes Creek in North Engadine. In the 1970s there were sales of Crown land in Engadine and Loftus. Extensive Crown land sales, especially in 1974 and 1975, created the new suburb of Yarrawarra between Engadine and Loftus on a strip of land flanked by the Princes Highway and a fall to tributary creeks of the Woronora River. This suburb, originally located north of Old Bush Road, now extends to Porter Road.

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