

On the water

Rowing, sculling in particular, was one of the colony's most popular sports in the 19th century. Participation in sailing was also widespread, especially for those who made their living on the water.

Then in the early 20th century, a revolution occurred when many Sydneysiders became keen body surfers, and a few daredevils pioneered board riding.

The formative years of surfing marked the most significant change in leisure patterns in Australia's history. The enjoyment of beaches, free and open to all, was entrenched as a right.

Surfboard riding

Introduced to Cronulla in 1915 at the time of Hawaiian Duke Kahanamoku's visit, surfboard riding had a small following until the 1960s. With the introduction of shorter, lighter, mass-produced boards, surfing became a cult and the focus for teenage rebellion.

Brought to Australia in 1956, Malibu boards could be carried by the average person and were more manoeuvrable than longer, heavier boards. The Cronulla beaches were declared a national surfing reserve in 2008, a prestigious achievement that only a few beaches have attained.

In the early 1960s unacceptable teenage behaviour in Cronulla was sometimes unfairly linked to surfing, with a police crackdown on youths sleeping in cars, lighting fires and cooking meals on the beach.

Apparently, the surf clubs had lost control of the beaches, and a 'mass rape epidemic' was predicted. While there was no epidemic, in January 1965 two fifteen-year-old girls were murdered in the lonely sand dunes north of Wanda Beach.

Surfer girls

Australian women and girls – including older women – also ‘took to the water’. Although by the 1920s many women were strong still water swimmers and enjoyed the surf, they were relegated to a decorative role on the beaches, as later reflected in the 1979 novel *Puberty Blues* by Shire writers Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey.

When finally admitted to full membership of surf clubs in 1980, the influx of new female members helped save what was fast becoming an institution in decline.

Young women also became adept board riders, and in 1998 the Cronulla Surfer Girls’ Boardriders’ Club was formed. This group aimed to encourage female board riders to participate and compete in the growing sport.

Surf lifesaving

For people who could not swim, even still water was perilous, surfing more so. In contrast Sydney's Aborigines were considered 'proficient swimmers and divers', but not surfers.

In the 1880s it was indigenous people from the Pacific islands who began teaching European Australians to body surf. By 1904 Cronulla had been discovered and was dubbed 'the Manly of the southern side of Sydney'.

As beaches became increasingly popular there were recurring cases of drowning. In February 1907 Bondi Surf Bathers' Life Saving Club was formed and organised voluntary beach patrols began, the cornerstone of the Australian surf lifesaving movement.

The drowning at Cronulla of electrical engineering student William Roy Swanton in late December 1907 was the catalyst for the formation in January 1908 of Cronulla Surf Lifesaving Club, Sutherland Shire's first.

Three more local clubs were eventually established: North Cronulla SLSC in 1924; Wanda SLSC in 1949 and Elouera SLSC in 1967.

Sculling champions

Elias Connell Laycock (right) is pictured here with fellow rowers Canadian Ned Hanlan and fellow Australian Bill Beach. Although described as one of Australia's finest scullers, Laycock never became world champion.

Beach was famous for his victory over Hanlan on the Parramatta River in 1894, before a crowd estimated at 100 000. At this time rowing/sculling were pre-eminent sports in which Australians excelled.

In 1876 Edward Trickett became the first Australian to be a world champion in any sport, and when Clarence River-born Henry Searle achieved a similar triumph in London in 1889 colonial Australians were ecstatic.

Searle's unexpected death in Melbourne on his return to Australia, at the age of 23, generated passionate grief which was sustained during the progress of his remains back to Maclean on the Clarence River for burial.

(Courtesy of Clarence River Historical Society)

Surfing – the Manly of the south

In the early 20th century, a revolution occurred in Australian life when many Sydneysiders became enthusiastic body surfers. Mirroring developments on America's west coast, a few daring surfers also pioneered board riding.

For 100 years after European settlement holidaymakers sometimes paddled cautiously or darted in and out of the waves, but as many could not swim, even still water was perilous, surfing more so. An energetic youngster at this time, businessman Frank Cridland, the grandfather of local history in Sutherland Shire, later recalled the attitude to surfing:

As a lad I was an ardent swimmer ... we drew the line at plunging into the open surf, where we believed certain death awaited us at the jaws of innumerable hungry sharks.

In contrast Sydney's Aborigines were 'proficient swimmers and divers'. Although they were sometimes seen manoeuvring bark canoes through the surf in the early days of white settlement, there is no evidence of an Aboriginal surfing tradition. In the 1880s it was indigenous people from the Pacific islands – working in Sydney – who began teaching European Australians to body surf.

Surfing, and swimming generally, was also impeded by Victorian notions of modesty which dictated that cumbersome swimming costumes be worn. Many people – usually men and boys – who could not afford or did not choose to wear these outfits went 'skinny dipping'. In order to avoid embarrassing scenes and bare flesh on metropolitan beaches, daylight surfing was prohibited in certain local government areas – but not Cronulla – by the Police Offences Act of 1901.

This regulation was overturned the following year in December when Randwick Municipality allowed daylight bathing – the first to do so in NSW – and government approval was given for male and female bathing in the sea in the municipality 'at all times and at all hours of the day' provided they were clothed 'from the neck and shoulders to the knees with a suitable bathing dress or costume'.

There was a great deal of enthusiasm for this new leisure activity, with the *Evening News* – probably correctly – claiming, the 'introduction of mixed or Continental bathing is one of the best things that has happened for the ladies and children of Sydney'. At Sydney's beaches, it reported in 1907,

everywhere are the kiddies. They tumble over one another and shriek with delight ... They seem to stay all day and every day in the water too and take no harm from it.

Meanwhile by 1904, in the wake of these developments, Cronulla, 'a charming summer resort' began to receive favourable publicity in the metropolitan press. Closer to home the *St George Call*, suggested that this newly discovered beach was 'the Manly of the southern side of Sydney'.

Unfortunately, as beach holidays and daytrips to Cronulla and other beaches became increasingly popular there were recurring cases of drowning. These tragedies demonstrate how poorly equipped Australians were with regard to water safety.

In February 1907 Bondi Surf Bathers' Life Saving Club was formed and the following month its 'amateur life-savers' gave demonstrations that included land and water drill and handling a lifeline 'fastened upon a reel'. It was considered the 'greatest feature' of this club was the 'voluntary system under which the members work.'

Aspiring members needed to pass a test, 'illustrating their efficiency to swim on the back with the arms folded, thus showing they are capable of bringing drowning persons ashore.' Organised voluntary beach patrols, the cornerstone of the Australian surf lifesaving movement had begun. Over the next years, experiments in lifesaving equipment continued, until by 1911 the line, reel and belt was the dominant rescue apparatus. Australia's iconic surf lifesaving movement had begun. Cronulla was not far behind.

The drowning at Cronulla of electrical engineering student William Roy Swanton in late December 1907 was the catalyst for the formalisation of the ad hoc 'club' or camp that already existed on the beach. Chaired by Councillor Charles McAlister, a meeting was held on 18 January 1908 that resolved to establish a Cronulla surf club, to become Sutherland Shire's first surf lifesaving club.

At this time also sunbathing – or sun 'hatching' as it was sometimes called – became popular. Surfing was still in its infancy when the lilywhite skin preferred in the 19th century went out of fashion, firstly for men and later for women. With no thought of the skin damage that many Anglo-Celtic skin types would suffer, a suntan was embraced enthusiastically as a beach fashion. In 1906 the *Sydney Mail* noted:

A sun-browned skin always wins respect. After a dip it is quite common to see youths oiling each other's backs preparatory to lying on the sand, so that the sun may give them a healthy tan.

Soon a suntan was a badge of masculinity, ironically at the same time racism was becoming institutionalised in Australia. With 'scores of men and youths as brown as South Sea Islanders' at Sydney's beaches, the *Sydney Mail* proclaimed, '[A] man feels he's a man when his skin is a real good brown'. The suntan had become a cult. A sea change had occurred in Australian leisure patterns within a few short years, but not just for males. Australian women and girls – including older women – also 'took to the water' with gusto. With some surprise the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented in 1909 that body surfing was 'ever drawing fresh adherents from the ranks of those strict women who started by roundly condemning it'.

Although by the 1920s many women were strong still water swimmers and enjoyed the surf, they were relegated to a purely decorative role on the beaches. This may have been one of the many complex ramifications of injured and disturbed men returning from the Great War. As surf lifesaving increasingly took on a paramilitary

character, women were banned from surf clubs, even though many had participated and competed in earlier years. When members of Cronulla Surf Lifesaving Club enlisted in large numbers during World War I local businessman Frank Stroud, according to his daughter Phyllis Farleigh, trained the women and girls of the Voluntary Aid Detachment to make up the shortfall.

It was the alleged inability to handle the lifesaver's equipment – surf boats and the line, reel and belt – that was most frequently cited as a reason for the exclusion of females. When finally admitted to full membership of surf clubs in 1980, the influx of new female members helped save what had become an institution in decline.

The early years of surfing as a mass participation activity in Sydney marked the most significant change in leisure patterns in Australia's history. The enjoyment of beaches, free and open to all, was entrenched as a right.

Duke Kahanamoku – a hero's welcome

Swimming champion Hawaiian Duke Kahanamoku had won a gold medal for swimming at the 1912 Olympic Games and was, in 1920, to repeat this achievement. When he visited Australia from late 1914 till early 1915 to promote surfboard riding and compete in swimming events, he was given a hero's welcome wherever he went.

On the rainy day in February 1915 when he and fellow Hawaiian George Cunha – an 'unassuming gentlemanly fellow' – visited Cronulla, large crowds gathered to watch them compete in a belt race with local lifesavers and demonstrate their board riding skills. In a huge swell on the 'big beach', as North Cronulla was called, Kahanamoku gave a stunning exhibition. The *St George Call* described how he made it look 'so ridiculously easy [by] standing upright, standing on his head, diving off, twisting the board'. Local men who tried found that board riding was not as effortless as it looked.

The four Bate Bay clubs:

Cronulla SLSC 1908

North Cronulla SLSC 1924

Wanda SLSC 1949

Elouera SLSC 1967

Cultural clash on the beaches

The teenagers of the 1960s stayed at school longer and had more employment opportunities than previous generations. Some annoyed their parents just as the teenagers of the 1920s had irked older citizens with their 'modern' swimming costumes. Surfboard riding, an increasingly popular sport at this time, became a cult and the focus for teenage rebellion. First introduced to Cronulla in 1915 it always had a small dedicated following. In the early 1960s with the introduction of shorter, lighter and mass-produced boards it became a much more widely practised sport. Many youngsters surfed and followed the cult of surfing with its associated music, clothes

and bleached hair. Some enthusiasts showed their dedication by wearing miniature surfboards on chains round their necks.

Malibu boards were first designed and experimented with at Malibu Beach in California. These lighter boards had the advantage that they could be carried by the average person and had more manoeuvrability than the old longer, heavier boards. Malibus were first brought to Australia in 1956 when a group of Californians came on a tour coinciding with the Melbourne Olympic Games. Cronulla was one of the places at which an exhibition carnival was held.

Uncontrolled surfboard riding amongst body surfers soon became a problem on the beaches, and in 1960 surfboards were banned on Cronulla Beach. Although board riders began to move to the Red House Beach between North Cronulla and Wanda there was widespread anxiety about 'Malibu surfboard groups'. Sutherland Shire Council attempted to control board riders by making the registration of surfboards compulsory. Unregistered boards were often impounded. This regulation stayed in force until 1969 when it was found that the cost of collection was greater than the revenue from fees collected. There was also concern on Cronulla beaches at this time that the 'surfboard craze' would threaten the future of surf clubs.

In Cronulla several incidents of unacceptable teenage behaviour were reported in the summer of 1962/63. 'Louts' were said to be 'standing over' police and terrorising beachgoers. On the eve of 'cracker night' in May 1963, 'surfies' went on a 'rampage' in Cronulla after surfing films were shown at the picture theatre. Youngsters described as having bleached hair and wearing 'skin-tight, brightly coloured clothing' as worn by so-called 'Surfies' and 'Rockers' threw fireworks 'indiscriminately' at pedestrians and cars. The *Leader* editorial proclaimed that these 'queerly garbed young monsters' were part of a young community 'brain-washed by crime and sex and kept in a state of adolescence instead of being taught to grow up'.

During the October long weekend in 1963 there was a police crackdown. A spokesman declared that police would not 'tolerate any mob rule or horseplay in Cronulla or any other section of the Shire.' The main problem, it was said, were those who camped on or near the beaches. Hundreds of youths were reported to be sleeping in cars, lighting fires and cooking meals on the beach. The primary trouble spot was between Red House and Wanda Beaches. There were break-ins, car thefts and skirmishes between rival gangs. Louts were reported to have jostled a Council officer when he attempted to stop their littering. Cronulla was becoming a 'jungle of youth with no responsibility'.

The surf clubs had, it was claimed, lost control of the beaches. Board riders who were unskilled and poor swimmers were regularly rescued from Red House Beach by personnel from North Cronulla Surf Club who had to 'run half a mile and then swim 50 to 60 yards through heavy surf'. It was suggested that a board riders' club be formed at this beach.

In November 1964 Cronulla's alleged state of lawlessness was brought to the attention of State Parliament. Local member Ian Griffith urged that the number of

police in beachside areas, such as Cronulla, should be increased in order to control the 'hoodlum behaviour that was getting worse every year'. In his speech he referred to the 'mass rape epidemic' and the 'wild young louts and larrikins of both sexes who had been allowed to run wild by their parents'. He predicted that if the police force were not strengthened the 'tragic epidemic of crime will get worse'.

Although there was no 'epidemic' as Griffith predicted, less than two months after his speech a crime was committed near Cronulla which shocked the nation. In January 1965 two fifteen-year-old girls from West Ryde were murdered in the lonely sand dunes north of Wanda Beach. (See Murder & Mayhem)

Jacko

Bankstown boy Brian Jackson (1936-2021) arrived in Cronulla in 1952 and joined Wanda SLSC. After admiring visiting Americans riding Malibus off Cronulla Point, he cobbled together Bobby Brown's first surfboard – a lad who was to become a surfing champion. By 1962 'Jacko' was working as a surfboard manufacturer in a Caringbah business which lasted 50 years. He was a businessman but more importantly a surfing legend.

Photo & story courtesy of John Veage, the *Leader*, 21 July 2021.

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