

## **Essential services**

While country towns had town water supplies and other amenities, Sutherland Shire struggled with rudimentary services. The district was not part of the Sydney metropolitan area until after World War II.

In 1917 a private contractor supplied 89 Cronulla residents with electricity. After Sutherland Shire Council took this over in 1925, electricity services were slowly installed throughout the next 15 years.

As the population swelled and visitor numbers increased, water from tanks and wells was inadequate. The situation only improved after 1931 when water from Woronora Dam became available.

Backyard dunnies – and problematic septic tanks – were ubiquitous. The sanitary depot on Dolans Road was condemned in 1925 and in 1939 another depot was set up near Menai. A sewerage system, ‘turned on’ in 1956, mainly served Cronulla. Dunnies and septic tanks were still common in the 1970s.

Health services were scarce. Baby health centres – the first opened at Sutherland in 1934 – were needed for mothers who relied on private maternity hospitals such as Jacaranda Hospital at Woollooware, until the Shire’s first public hospital, Sutherland Hospital, opened in 1958.

## **Essential services**

Sutherland Shire was not officially part of the Sydney metropolitan district until after World War II: bureaucrats and politicians were often confused as to the district's status. One of the results of this uncertainty was that the Shire remained what historian Maryanne Larkin has called, an 'unserved island between St George and Illawarra', long after country towns with much smaller populations had town water supplies and telephone services.

The situation could have been even worse had Cronulla not been Sutherland Shire's pre-eminent suburb after surfing 'took off' and the tramway link to the railway at Sutherland was completed in 1911. Gazetted as an urban area in 1912, Cronulla was now eligible for amenities, not usually available in sparsely settled areas. As a result, services slowly spread to less settled parts of the district and the whole Shire eventually benefitted.

### **Electricity**

In 1917 a private contractor began providing electricity to 89 Cronulla residents. When this proved unsatisfactory the service was sold to the Council in 1925, and the following year a Council service was officially switched on. Gradually other parts of the Shire were supplied until by 1940 electricity mains extended to the far reaches of the Shire. Although Engadine and Heathcote had an electricity supply by 1938, it was 1949 before Menai had one.

Evidence of Sutherland Shire Council's electricity distribution network can still be seen in the small sub-stations built as part of this undertaking. This service operated until 1955 when Sydney County Council took over the Shire electricity supply, as it did in many parts of the metropolitan area.

### **Water**

A reliable water supply was badly needed, and in 1921 a Department of Public Works committee investigated the problem of Sutherland Shire's water supply for the second time in three years. The main reason for the inquiry was the growth of Cronulla and the influx of summer visitors. Tank water and wells were no longer adequate, and in dry times water had to be bought from the Tramways Department's standpipe at Miranda.

The inquiry rejected a plan to dam the Woronora River and proposed instead that a temporary scheme should be implemented, which involved bringing water to Miranda from the Penshurst Reservoir. This recommendation was reversed when Labor's Jack Lang won office and work began on the Woronora Dam in 1927.

Finally, after much delay the Shire water supply was 'turned on' in 1931, and two years later 820 properties were connected. Less settled parts of the Shire had to wait until 1954 when the Heathcote-Engadine high-level water extension was opened. Despite considerable agitation among Menai poultry farmers, it was not until 1960 that 'town water' was supplied to the western reaches of the Shire.

## **Toilets**

As the Shire population increased, the feasibility of a sewerage connection was investigated. In 1925 the Department of Health condemned the Council's sanitary depot established in 1908 on Dolans Road – now part of Woollooware Golf Course. This was where the contents of the 'dunny carts' were deposited.

Another depot site was chosen near Sylvania and Garnet Roads, but as soldier settlers, oyster growers and residents opposed this plan, it was abandoned, and in 1939 a site near Menai was selected instead. This was a few miles south of the township of 74 buildings on the Old Illawarra Road, and Menai residents, worried about pollution, protested vigorously. They were ignored.

By 1948 most parts of the Shire, except for the outlying areas of Bundeena, Kurnell, Grays Point and Menai were served by the Council's sanitary – 'dunny cart' – service. Although Menai hosted the disposal depot, it did not benefit from this.

Widely used in outer suburban areas such as Sutherland Shire, septic tanks caused problems. These needed to be regularly emptied, and although Council ran a service for this purpose, it is not known how widely it was used. In 1956 a councillor was threatened with prosecution for illegally emptying his septic tank onto a neighbouring vacant block at Box Road, Jannali.

Residents were relieved when work began on a sewerage scheme in 1952. This was 'turned on' in 1956, but it was many years before most of the Shire had a sewerage service. Elizabeth Craig recalls, when looking at houses in Oyster Bay and Como in the mid-1970s, that most residents still had either backyard dunnies or septic tanks.

Meanwhile treated sewage was discharged at Potter Point near Boat Harbour. Residents protested when serious pollution became obvious on Cronulla's beaches in the 1980s. Eventually this problem was reduced when the sewerage treatment plant was upgraded in 2001.

## **Health**

Although there were a number of doctors living in Sutherland Shire, especially at Cronulla Point headland – known locally as the 'doctor's corner' – public health services were scarce. Sutherland Shire residents strongly supported St George Hospital at Kogarah, with Cronulla boat builder John Hill serving on the hospital board. Shire residents regularly used its facilities. Accident victims such as little Sid Sparkes of Miranda were rushed over the Georges River for treatment when his sister Sylvia accidentally chopped off his finger with her father's axe.

Lives were lost due to delays in getting patients onto the Georges River ferry. In 1927, 15-year-old Mervyn Allum, a visitor from Ashfield, was 'terribly mutilated' by a shark when swimming near Grays Point. Resident William Coombes drove the boy in his Model T Ford to the ferry landing while an ambulance was summoned to the northern side of the Georges River. Coombes watched anxiously as cars were methodically loaded, before the ferry

slowly made its way across the river. It all took too long and the boy was dead on arrival at St George Hospital.

During the 1920s, only two public hospitals were built in Sydney, despite extensive suburban expansion, as there was little commitment to public health in NSW. As a result, Sutherland Shire residents had to manage with inadequate health services. From the mid-1920s a campaign was waged for a hospital, with extensive community fund-raising, including a 'tasteful' queen contest.

Private maternity hospitals provided services for those who could afford them but it was not until 1934 when the Shire's first baby health centre was opened that mothers had a para-medical service available. Free bus travel was provided to the Sutherland clinic until another was established in 1939 at Cronulla. Nevertheless, compared with the rest of Sydney the southern, and western suburbs as well, were badly off for such services.

Finally in 1958, Sutherland Shire had its own hospital. Back in 1944, when the first meeting of the hospital board had been held, it was decided that the most suitable place to build was on 'Lehane's paddock', a large block of land at Caringbah used during the War as an army camp. Although the Minister for Health approved this and the 'first sod' was turned in 1950, building did not begin until September 1953. This progressed by 'fits and starts' until 1958 when Sutherland Hospital was triumphantly opened before a crowd of 10 000 people.

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