

The Wanda Beach murders

On 12 January 1965 the bodies of two fifteen-year-old girls were found murdered in the sand dunes about two kilometres north of the Wanda Surf Club.

On the previous day the girls had travelled by train to Cronulla from their home in West Ryde with four younger brothers and sisters.

The girls walked to the Wanda Beach sand dune area and did not return. When they tired of waiting, the younger children returned home by train.

Police scoured the sand hills unsuccessfully for evidence. Despite the police interviewing 7000 people in the next 18 months, making it the largest investigation in history, the murderer was never found. New theories have often been highlighted over the years.

Events such as this had a huge impact on the national psyche.

Wanda Beach Murders

There had been trouble on the beaches for some years before Cronulla's alleged state of lawlessness was brought before the attention of State Parliament in November 1964. 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.



On Sunday 10 January 1965 there had been a surf carnival at Wanda with crowds and innocent amiable activity. In contrast the next day was overcast. The beach had been closed because of rough seas and was almost deserted. Accompanied by younger brothers and sisters, Marianne Schmidt and Christine Sharrock travelled by train to Cronulla on Monday 11 January. During the afternoon the two fifteen-year-olds ventured into the Wanda sand dune area but did not return. When the younger children grew tired of waiting, they returned home by train. The next day a man walking along the beach about two kilometres north of Wanda Surf Club found the girls' bodies.

As light faded that afternoon members of the police rescue squad set up arc lights under which forensic experts worked. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported how

'scores of people made the trek of about a mile over the sandhills to watch the doctors and police work against the background of the lighted Kurnell refineries.'

During the next few days, the police and Sutherland Shire Council workers sifted through tonnes of sand in an attempt to find a murder weapon. It soon became evident that these were not pristine sand dunes. *The Leader* described how the 'almost unbelievable amount of rubbish is bewildering detectives in their search for clues'. This unsuccessful hunt was eventually abandoned.

In view of the recent public concern about teenage activity in the area, it is not surprising that 'surfies' were immediately targeted in the police investigation. Several teenage boys with 'long fair surfie hair' were detained and questioned. A brother of one of the girls stated that he had seen such a person go with the girls into the sandhills and later return alone. There were plenty of such lads to question. After several futile interrogations police changed tack in an effort to contact the 'surfie'. It was now said that he was possibly 'in the wrong place at the wrong time' and Police Commissioner Norm Allan pleaded for him to report to police. The New South Wales police force had a fearsome reputation at this time for frequently using unorthodox means of dealing with suspects, so it is not surprising that the 'surfie' never came forward.

Attention gradually shifted from the crime to the sandhills themselves. This had been a wonderland where generations of local children had played, tobogganing down immense sandy slopes. Film makers had shot desert scenes in the huge dunes which could be seen from the Blue Mountains. Although the sandhills were still extensive in the 1960s, they had suffered years of degradation. Tonnes of sand had been trucked away by private contractors and the area had degenerated into a filthy rubbish tip. Sutherland Shire Council considered making the area a giant sports complex. This plan had come to nothing.

Wanda was not only described as Sydney's 'filthiest and loneliest beach' but it was also said to be a haunt for 'perverts, hoodlums and nude grog drinkers'. *The Leader* maintained that if mounted police patrolled the area, as they once had, two lives may have been saved. The 'surfie' the police had sought now faded from public attention. The murderer, it was suggested, was probably a 'degenerate who knows the desolate sandhills intimately ... a lone figure who has spent hours a day spying on nude sunbathers and lovers'.

As the summer of 1965 rolled on, other issues made headlines in the metropolitan newspapers. The Rolling Stones, led by a baby-faced Mick Jagger, visited Sydney for the first time and towards the end of the month the press recorded every detail of Winston Churchill's death and funeral. Although the haunting mystery of the Wanda murders was no longer making front page news a dogged investigation continued.

Within 18 months police had interviewed 7000 people, making it the largest investigation in Australian history.

In November 1967 the special CIB Wanda Beach murder squad withdrew from its Cronulla headquarters. A stalemate had been reached in the investigation and the squad was needed elsewhere. The murderer was never found and the case still evokes interest. At regular intervals new theories are published and links with other murders are contrived. The double murder and rape made the name of Wanda Beach notorious all over New South Wales. Cronulla lost its innocence in January 1965.

This Channel 9 newsclip includes two news stories from 1965 featuring reporter Ian Ross (1940-2014) as well as silent news clips of police investigators searching the beach.

<https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/nine-news-wanda-beach-murders>

References:

- Pauline Curby, *A Pictorial History of Cronulla*, Kingsclear Books, 1998 (2nd edition 2006)
- *The St George & Sutherland Shire Leader (The Leader)*
- *Sydney Morning Herald*