

Menai mailbox

A fixture outside Menai Post Office, this mailbox was a relic of the pre-Federation NSW postal service.

In June 1905 a post office – in reality a receiving office – was established at Menai or Bangor as it was then called, a sparsely populated ‘Homestead Selection’ area, settled only 10 years earlier by market gardeners.

The Bangor Progress Association campaigned for a post office over several months, and Fanny Midgley, whose home was ‘centrally situated’ was appointed to operate the receiving office. Her teenage son Richard carried the mails three times a week to and from Sutherland, crossing the Woronora River by boat.

In 1974 two brothers, Society stalwarts Fred and Alf Midgley arranged to have the mailbox donated to Sutherland Shire Historical Society.

Recently we found a 1962 penny in the mailbox but we’d like your donation to be a gold coin – or a note if you can afford it.

Make a donation – just lift the flap

Menai (Bangor) post office

On 5 June 1975 the 70th anniversary of the foundation of a post office, then a receiving office, at Bangor was marked. It was also an occasion to celebrate the carrying of the first mail between the settlement and Sutherland. The following article – with slight modifications – appeared in SSHS Bulletin in July 1975:

In November 1904 Robert Smith of 'Bangor, via Peakhurst', Secretary of the Bangor Progress Association, appealed to George Fuller MP for assistance in getting a post office. Earlier representations to the Post Master General had not been successful and the Department considered that there was not sufficient business for a post office. Robert Smith described the place as a settlement three miles west of Sutherland and six miles from Peakhurst. He pointed out that the estimated number of letters posted from the area was under-estimated because,

this being a market gardeners' place most of our mail is given to anyone going to market or to Sutherland or Hurstville as the case may be. Many of our letters are posted in Sydney and stamps purchased there.

Smith stated that the land was 'Homestead Selections', and that as thousands of acres were available and the settlement was close to Sydney an increase in postal business could be expected. The Department was willing to spend up to £12 a year on postal facilities. Smith replied that no one could run a mail for that amount as it would cost 1/6d per week to cross over the Woronora River in a private boat to Sutherland. He suggested that if the Department allowed £25 someone would be willing to take the care of a post office.

Representations for the post office continued, and early in 1905 when Mrs. Fanny Midgley agreed to take charge and carry the mail to and from Sutherland for £15 a year the Department approved the opening of a receiving office for mails. Several others had applied to the Department but Mrs. Midgley had been recommended by Mr. Herbert Brigden, postmaster at Sutherland. He wrote: 'Mrs. Midgley's place of residence is centrally situated and is only a few hundred yards from Mr Owen Jones' residence was previously recommended as a Receiving Office keeper'.

A son of Fanny Midgley, Richard, was elected to carry the mails. Now in his 85th year, active and well, Richard Midgley resides at Manly and recently recalled his experiences of carrying the mailbag:

If I remember correctly, it was in the mornings three times a week, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, leaving Menai – then Bangor in those days – at 9.00 am, and leaving Sutherland for Bangor at 11.00 am. I went by foot and crossed the Woronora River by rowboat, being rowed over by either Mr. Price or his handyman Old Ted. There was only a rough foot track on either side of the river, and in places a very rough track it was, too, I can remember it very well, and it was very miserable in wet weather, and I had to travel in all weathers. I was then about 15 years of age.

At that time there were only about half a dozen families in Bangor at the period I can remember – the Dawsons, Bentleys, Maymans, Jones, Midgleys; there may have been a

couple of others which I don't recall. The post office at Sutherland was about where it is now, only it was a weatherboard building facing the main road. I had to spend about one hour in Sutherland waiting for the mail train to arrive, and I got very friendly with a probation boy at Sutherland Railway and when he was transferred from there, I took his place. The local station master sent me to Sydney to the Railway Department where I passed an examination and was employed by the Railway Department for four years until I was 20 years of age.

As there were already other offices by the name of Bangor in the Commonwealth, the residents were asked to nominate a change of name. On the 21 February 1905 Robert Smith wrote on behalf of the Bangor Progress Association:

I have received your letter today in reference to changing the name of this place, and called all the residents of this place together (all that was within reach) and we decided to send you the following names. As it is quite impossible for us to pick a name not being used already as a post office, that is a certainty, and leave it to your opinion which name it shall be.

Names submitted at the foot of the letter were: Mona, Menai, Lugarno Flower Hill, Thorps Forest, Grass Valley, Garland, Salisbury and Elmhurst. The first name, 'Mona', was crossed off by the postmaster at Sutherland and noted 'in Queensland already'. The second name 'Menai' was marked 'suitable and not taken up'. An interesting note was penned to Mr. Bridgen concerning the choice of the name from Mr. Owen Jones, a Welshman and pioneer settler:

Am extremely sorry for having to change the name. I was first to live in the district and have the honour of naming the place and since this place has been well advertised especially last elections. Now we call you to choose. I hope it will be short. I favour 1st Menai, 2nd Mona, 3rd Lugarno.

A small petition containing 31 names from nine households asked for the mail to be run on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays prior to the Receiving Office being opened.

New South Wales Mailbox: before Federation as the Commonwealth of Australia, each State was entirely responsible for all Government facilities — including not only Defence but also Postal Services. All letter-posting boxes therefore carried the insignia of New South Wales. One of the last existing of these was outside the Menai Post Office. Some time ago the Midgley brothers (whose forebears came to Menai, then Bangor, in 1896) suggested that the P.M.G. be approached regarding the donation of this box to the Society. Liaison was carried out through the courtesy of the Shire Council and about three months ago the historical mailbox was given us, and is now in the care of the President.

References:

- Alf Midgley. Sources: Historical Archives NSW Post Office: Mr. Richard Midgley, *SSHS Bulletin*, July 1975, pp. 132-134
- *SSHS Bulletin*, January 1975, p.84