

Welcome to Sutherland Shire Museum – Old but New

Located at the southern border of the Sydney metropolitan region, Sutherland Shire is both old and new. This place of beauty, with beaches, wetlands, bays, rivers and tablelands dissected by deep river valleys and gorges was home to the Dharawal people for long ages. In contrast, it is only in the relatively short space of time since World War II that the district has become a fully suburban landscape. Now behind the sandstone cliffs, remnant sand dunes and sandy beaches of the striking southern Sydney coastline sits a maze of mainly post-World War II suburban development.

The Georges River, separates Sutherland Shire from the rest of Sydney, while the Royal National Park divides it from the Illawarra district to the south. In the Royal National Park, in places such as at Wattamolla Lagoon it is not hard to imagine how the Dharawal people camped, fished and hunted for thousands of years before 1788. These first residents delighted in the lagoon and the pounding surf nearby.

European settlement largely bypassed what is now Sutherland Shire. In 1788 the first governor of New South Wales, the leader of a horde of hungry newcomers, rejected coastal Sydney. A part-time farmer in England, Arthur Phillip commented scathingly that the 'sea-coast does not offer any situation ... which is calculated for a town whose inhabitants are to be employed in agriculture'. Then in 1796 when Bass and Flinders, the young adventurous 'discoverers' of Port Hacking, declared this scenic waterway was 'too shoal' for shipping, interest in the district flagged.

By the 1860s, many NSW colonists begin to acquire freehold tenure – on stolen Aboriginal land. In the Sutherland district, however, only less secure leaseholds were available because of one man's iron grip on thousands of acres on which he aimed to create a profitable estate. Nevertheless, farmers did settle on scattered holdings while fishermen, shooters and occasionally holidaymakers drifted into the region.

Despite the introduction of local government in 1906, the construction of a rail link to the city and a road bridge across the Georges River, Sutherland Shire's population was sparse, with four main villages – Sutherland, Cronulla, Miranda and Caringbah – and smaller settlements such as Sylvania and Como. As the population of Australia surged in the 1950s and 1960s and migrants thronged to the inner city, many 'old Australians' moved to Sutherland Shire where land was relatively cheap.

The menfolk commuted to jobs in the city or were employed in new light industries that were soon flourishing. Many women – mothers of the 'baby boom' generation – spent their children's early years out of the paid workforce. They revelled in barbeques in large backyards while their minimally supervised offspring roamed at will to nearby beaches, rivers, creeks and in the remnant bushland.

In this museum we highlight a selection of objects and stories reflecting this old but new history of Sutherland Shire – once described as, 'A sort of no-man's land between Sydney and the Illawarra'. [SMH, 11 May 1929, p. 13 quoted in Larkin p. 151.]