

Commerce

In the inter-war years in Sutherland Shire, businesses connected to primary industries flourished – such as the abattoirs in Gymea. At Miranda, Piper's General Store was a produce store for farmers as well as a postal agency.

Sutherland Shire had no department store until McDowells Ltd. opened at Caringbah in 1961. Later Waltons took over this business but by the early 1980s its days were numbered as shopping centres affected retail in the Shire's shopping strips.

This was most noticeable when a former brick pit at Miranda became the site of Miranda Fair shopping mall. Opening in March 1964 the complex transformed retailing in Sutherland Shire. Westfield Development Corporation assumed control in 1971 and expanded the centre to become Westfield Miranda.

In the early 1980s Southgate Shopping Centre, opened on the Princes Highway and Port Hacking Road, and more recently a retail/residential complex has been built on the site of the former Kirrawee brickworks.

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Sutherland Shire's slow transformation from rural to suburban in the inter-war years relied almost exclusively on home-building and small-scale enterprises. As Cronulla became a tourist mecca, service industries – with a familiar pattern of casual and intermittent employment – were the suburb's dominant enterprises. In 1931, there were, listed in John Sands NSW Directory, tearooms, guesthouses, a variety of shops, real estate agents and a lawn mower expert.

A number of commercial enterprises flourished in Sutherland Shire, many connected to primary industries that carried on even as suburbs slowly developed. In the 1920s Thomas 'Banjo' Alan Patterson operated abattoirs in Gympie and a butchery, with attached residence, at Miranda another local butcher, William McDonald – known as 'Billy Mac' – had earlier run his business from this premises but later moved to another location in Miranda.

Also in Miranda, Piper's General Store in Malvern Road, now the Kingsway, was a postal agency and produce store for local farmers. Italian market gardeners, working nearby where Seymour Shaw Park is now, were among its customers.

This premises changed hands in 1923 when stepbrothers Charles and Walter Penprase took over from Pipers. While some produce was sold, the brothers operated the business primarily as a general store. Charles' son Ron Penprase (b.1928) recalled how his grandmother Annie ran the haberdashery section. Penprase Bros. General Store was extended in 1940, but eight years later the family sold the shop and the old building was eventually demolished.

This was not the family's only business. In 1936 Penprase Bros. Hardware and Glass Merchants store opened in Curranulla Street, Cronulla, specialising in 'fishing tackle and ammunition'. Although the business was sold in the 1950s, it continued to operate as a hardware store for many years. An arcade with several small shops and a supermarket now occupies the site at the northern end of Cronulla mall.

As car ownership grew in Sydney, the need for garages or service stations as they are now called increased. At one time there were two in Curranulla Street, Cronulla. Another that did good business was Bill Bullman's garage on the corner of the Princes Highway and the Kingsway, where today there are a number of car saleyards. Bill sold Plume petrol and was an NRMA repair shop. The increasing dominance of motor transport in post-war Australia led to Sutherland Shire's first large-scale industry being established. (See Industry Overview)

Post-war shopping

There was no department store in Sutherland Shire until McDowells Ltd. opened a store at Caringbah in 1961, one of the first to be opened outside of the CBD. Frank McDowell whose father founded the department store in 1920, lived on Ewos Parade near Oak Park in Cronulla. McDowells was located on the corner of the Kingsway and President Avenue, the hub of Caringbah where Burns' timber yard had once operated. Described as a 'bright modern and spacious' store, McDowells was the first in Sydney to have a 'talking lift'. So great were the store's power needs that an electricity sub-station was constructed beneath the basement.

The store manager and his wife, Gordon and Lorraine Stone, both from theatrical backgrounds set about making McDowells the centrepiece of Caringbah's fashion precinct. Like city department stores, McDowells Caringbah embraced a culture of service where sales staff were fully trained experts in their sales area – whether it be fashion, carpet, wool, gloves or footwear. 'If you sold dress materials, you had to know how to make a dress,' explains Gordon. McDowells staff modelled for regular fashion parades with props made instore. For instance, nylon filings were used to make 'ski slopes' for the winter fashion parade. When a parade was on, models would leave their department, perform for half an hour and then return to their department. 'You would go from Cinderella to princess and back to Cinderella', remembers Lorraine with a laugh. 'That's what made the job exciting.'

The advent of shopping malls in the suburbs transformed retailing dramatically away from strip shopping centres. Miranda Fair shopping mall, built on the site of Fowler's brick pit, opened in March 1964. The writing was on the wall for McDowells, and in 1972 following closure of the city store, Waltons took over the McDowells store in Caringbah, changing its focus to whitegoods. But by the early 1980s its days were also numbered and it closed. The building remains, but now has a variety of tenants including a pharmacy, bank and offices on the upper floors.

Originally a Myer shopping centre, which apparently brought the 'fun of the fair to family shopping', Miranda Fair was not the first shopping mall in Sydney, but was to become one of the largest. When Westfield Development Corporation Ltd. assumed control in 1971 the centre expanded and parking spaces significantly increased. Two further major extensions have been completed in the last 30 years. This huge complex is officially called 'Westfield Miranda', but this name is not often heard, as Sutherland Shire residents still refer to it as 'Miranda Fair'.

In May 1983 another shopping centre opened, this time in Sylvania. Southgate Shopping Centre is located on the Princes Highway and Port Hacking Road, one block east of where the Samways family once ran dairy cattle and tended their market garden.

Shopping in the Shire has been transformed even further with arrival of cheaper self-service retail outlets and online shopping – to the detriment of department stores.

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