



*Sutherland Shire
Historical Society Inc*



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Eckersley - The Town That was To Be

Frank Purvis is an Engineer working at the Qantas Jet Base in Mascot. Frank is a keen amateur historian and local history buff. In the February issue of the Bulletin he wrote about the military history of Loftus and the camps there just prior to the Great War of 1914-1918. In this quarter's Bulletin Frank has written about the town that "perhaps" was to be what is now Sutherland. Of course we'll never know.

The Parish of Eckersley

The Parish of Eckersley lay within what is now the Holsworthy Field Firing Range and extended from Woronora River in the east to the Georges River in the west and lying between Campbelltown, Liverpool and Bulli. It was opened up for settlement under the Crown lands Act of 1884.

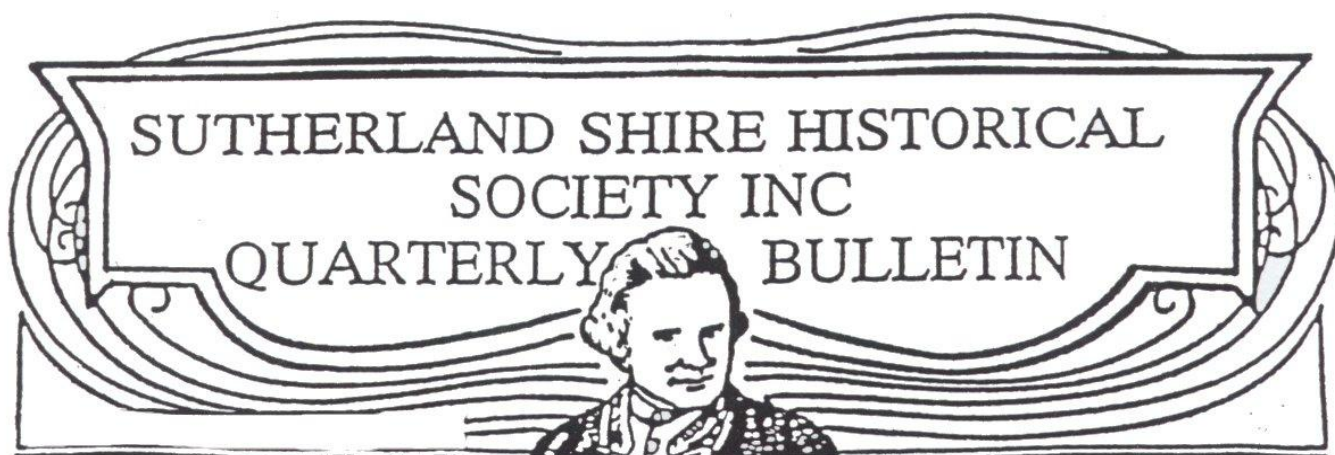
A firm of Sydney auctioneers boasted "land of stupendous dimensions" down the eastern side of the Georges River that included the hardy sandstone country that was to become the settlement of Eckersley. As a result of these "boasts", a number of "selections" were taken up in the late 1880's and early 1890s, the size of which varied from 50 to in excess of 900 acres.

The settlers eventually established a number of fine vineyards and orchards along the old coach road, which lead from Liverpool to Darkes Forest.

Eckersley settlement was 11 miles from Liverpool and was situated along an extension of Greenhills Avenue and the Old Illawarra Road (the old coach road) to Darkes Forest. National Park Road (later named Georges River Road) led to a ford at the junction of Peter Meadows Creek and the Georges River. After crossing the river, this road linked up with Greenhills Road in Eckersley. There was also a ford across the Georges River at Frere's Crossing to provide access for a number of families in that part of the settlement.

Cont. Page 12

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Designed by the late Fred Midgely

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The Society's financial year commences 1st of December and concludes on the 30th November of the following year.

In accordance with the above, membership renewals are due on the 1st of December each year. Renewal forms on this page (below) should be completed and handed to the Honorary Treasurer at the monthly general meeting or posted to the Society using the address shown on the renewal form. The renewal application should also contain the appropriate subscription fee.

To assist with accurate record keeping each member is required to complete an individual renewal form. It should be noted that a failure to pay the membership fee within the three months from the end of the Financial Year will result in a lapse of membership.

RECEIPTS: Receipts may be collected from the Treasurer at monthly meetings. If you wish to have your receipt posted to you a stamped self addressed envelope must be included with your renewal form and payment.

Application for Renewal of Membership 2001

Application for Renewal of Membership 2001

TITLE: Mr.Mrs.Ms.

Family

Name.....

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Name.....

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Please find my Subscription for 2001 enclosed herewith

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Signed

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SUTHERLAND SHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

Bulletin copies are supplied to all branches of the Shire Library; to the Mayor, General Manager and all councillors; the Royal Australian Historical Society; National Trust (NSW); State Library, NSW; National Library, Canberra; University of Sydney and UNSW; State Rail Authority; Australia Post Archives; Sydney Water Board Historical Research Unit.

Bulletin Extracts: Editorial material may be reprinted in other publications provided that acknowledgement is made both to the author and the Society's magazine. Copyright is retained by the author.

Contributions: Members are invited to submit material for inclusion in the Bulletin which need not be confined to local history, although this is especially welcome. If material is extracted or re-written, please state the source. Care should be taken with material still in copyright and written permission obtained from the author and the publisher. Please submit A4 typed pages of text and include your name, address and phone number. Legible hand written articles may be accepted in some circumstances.

Meetings of the Society are held monthly on the third Friday at 7.45pm at the Multi Purpose Building, Flora Street, Sutherland. (Next to Council carpark)

VISITORS ARE WELCOME

All correspondence should be addressed to

**The Honorary Secretary
Sutherland Shire Historical Society
PO Box 389
Sutherland NSW 1499**

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Presidents Remarks

One of the roles of our Historical Society is to try and date landmarks and try to preserve them. Owen Jones, the Welsh pioneer of the Menai District came to the area with his family in 1895, purchasing portion of the E.L. Spencer property of 63 acres granted in 1835. A well grown Moreton Bay fig tree was growing in the middle of this site in 1895 and is now threatened by the construction of a large warehouse. A statutory declaration by his youngest daughter, now 92, attests to the fact that the tree was huge when she was a child. The developer is willing to relocate the tree, but local residents do not want it moved as this destroys its provenance. The site is bounded by Illawarra, Menai, and Carter roads.

Old Illawarra Road was surveyed in 1843 by Roderick Mitchell, a nephew of Sir Thomas Mitchell, and then later Asst. Surveyor William Darke. This provided a faster route to the South Coast, saving 20 miles on the former route via Appin. However prior to this time there was a rough track to Lugarno from the city used by travellers since 1820. They crossed the Georges River by boat and raft, and then continued on through Illawong and Menai to the Needles over the Woronora River, and on to the South Coast. No doubt this was the route surveyed by Mitchell and made into a road. Visiting Governors loved to plant trees along the routes they took in the colony and in 1835 at Pickering Park, Peakhurst a Moreton Bay fig was planted by Governor Macquarie, possibly en route for the south. Alfred Barden, a local butcher had land near Bangor, but we do not know if he had a residence there. The Botanical Gardens promoted the Moreton Bay fig as a marvellous shade tree for cattle, and sent boxes of seedlings all over the country.

Unfortunately there appears no written record as to when the tree at Menai actually was planted, so we can only surmise that it is over a century old and possibly a sesquicentarian or earlier. The only other Moreton Bay figs in the Shire were believed to be handed out as seedlings by Anthony Hordens in the early 1920's as a promotion in line with their tree slogan: "While I live I'll grow!". (Regular deliveries from Anthony Hordern's by horse and cart were made to the area monthly.) Of course Anthony Hordern's tree at Moss Vale is no longer in existence, nor is Anthony Hordern's, but the trees they handed out still survive throughout the district.

And we trust also will the tree survive on Owen Jones's property, the site of the first PO, the first school, and the first meeting place of the Menai District Progress Association which began in May 1901. Local schoolchildren have offered to take up the cause writing letters to the papers and alerting all

residents of the Shire to the tree's plight. Perhaps we could borrow the slogan: "While the tree lives, Menai will grow" and hope they are not mutually exclusive!



Clr. Dawn Emerson, President

Meetings arranged for 2000:

18th August: Mrs. Louisa Singleman: The History of Sandy Point

15th September. Mr Shayne Williams: The Meeting of Two Cultures

20th October: Mr. Peter Kristian : The First Fleet

February, 2001: George Roberts: The Redex Trials- the people, the cars-- now the dust has settled!



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

For those of you who received a copy of our May Bulletin that was less than high quality I apologize. The issue of print quality has been raised with Council and we have been assured that the quality will improve substantially in future issues.

In this issue I hope to continue the use of locally derived historical material and highlight the historical expertise we have in the Shire. It is my view that enticing men and women of the standard of Ed Duyker and Pauline Curby along with gifted amateurs such as Frank Purvis and John Risebrow of this issue, that we can quickly become a sought after journal of local history.

As some of you may be aware Dawn Emerson, Maurie Beaven and myself attended Liverpool Historical Society's annual lecture at their offices on Saturday 5th August. I soon became very envious of their approach to the role of an Historical Society and saw how powerful a group they were in their council.

I was drawn to the idea that we as a group do not command the position and power that the Liverpool Society attracts. I asked myself how we could remedy that situation. I concluded that we must be more outwardly focused and demanding of Council. It is we, the members of the Historical Society, that hold the future of Sutherland Shire history in our grasp.

We must set an agenda that drives the oldest European inhabited area of Australia, and we must set the agenda for the first European settlement of Australia, we must set the agenda for the first Aboriginal-European discourse in this land.

Yet we do not appear to do this. We have some of the most outstanding historical items in the whole of Australia yet we do little to promote their existence. As an example, only this Friday was I given a clay pipe that had been dug from a midden in North West Arm, and asked the question is this pipe valuable!!!!

What have we done when such a wonderful, informative and valuable piece of our history can be passed around in the hope that someone will recognise its value. I beg you all, help me do something that raises the awareness of this historically somnolent shire of ours before all of our history vanishes to that place on Old Illawarra Road where so many other items of our history have gone.

Les Bursill
Editor August 2000

Excursion Report

The Executive Committee confirmed that we will not have outing during September/October so that we will not conflict with the Olympic Games and therefore reduce the number of members may wish to attend either the Games or go with us.

The week-end of Friday November 24, 2000 to Sunday November 26, 2000 will be the next Excursion when, as previously advised will go to Canberra; Terry McCosker will be the guide and as I have previously intimated he has many interesting places to take us and not just "do" the usual tourist coach sites. Also, if you have somewhere you think would be of special interest we could ask Terry about that, too. (Leave Cronulla 8. am., Sutherland 8.30 am.)

The Motel chosen for accommodation is "Gold Creek Tourist Park", O'Hanlon Place, NICHOLLS, 2913; telephone (02 - 6241-3000.) This Motel is at Cockington Green. area and I understand about ten to fifteen minutes from the centre of Canberra business area.

Take your morning tea and luncheon for Friday and we will have lunch on Saturday and Sunday at a Club where you can make your choice of full meal and light snack, at your expense. The cost of the week-end including dinner bed and breakfast Friday/Saturday and Saturday/Sunday is Members \$205.00, Visitors \$210.00

Bookings are opened with Mrs. Betty McGrath, 9521 2227, 141 Loftus Avenue, Loftus; please make a deposit of \$25.00 with bookings and the balance may be paid in instalments but final money must be paid by October meeting to allow for our commitments.

AUGUST 2000 NEWSLETTER

As always the newsletter must be prepared early and I hope this lovely weather continues for our visit to the Aboriginal Sites in Royal National Park.

UPDATE ON ABORIGINAL SITES TRIP

The tour of Aboriginal sites in the Royal National Park was a wonderful experience & the knowledge of our guide Les Bursill was far beyond expectations. The stories were told so simply it made me feel we had been there in the times Les was describing. Thank you again Les. Terry as usual was a wonderful driver (Coach Captain hardly fitted the Minibus) Once again the Society's thanks to Terry and Les for donating their time to this project, and to Community Transport for granting us the use of the Mini-Bus.

Request have been made for an outing in February 2001 & a number of places suggested. We'll deal with that soon.

Aileen M Griffiths
OAM
EXCURSION CONVENOR

Aileen Griffiths
"Richmount"
34 Richmount Street,
Cronulla. 2230.

Telephone - 9523 5801 (I will return call if message on answering machine) Mobile -- 0408 - 580104.

MEMORIES OF CRONULLA IN THE TWENTIES.

BY KEN HEWSON

1. Davis's store
2. Pooly's store.
3. Electricity power station.
4. Original Catholic Church (replaced by new building 1966)
5. Tram good's shed.
6. Goddard Brs. plumbers specialising in gal. iron water tanks
7. Wormald's store.
8. Jenkins's grocer .
9. Harris's pastry cook.
10. Hand's timber yard (badly damaged by fire).
11. Pines guest house (burnt down)
12. Newton's fish shop
13. Soda fountain. (later known as milkbar)
14. Dodds's store.
15. Eddy's store.
16. Johnson's men's wear.
17. Vincent chemist.
18. P.U.Alley estate agent.
19. Gould's hardware.
20. Scaffidi greengrocer
22. Moran & Cato grocer.
23. National Bank (Mr.Black manager).
24. Rendell's Premier bakery.
25. Roger's shoe store.
26. Slater's men's wear
27. Mrs.Frede haberdashery.
28. Post office.
- [These four buildings (25-28) were built in the 20's when the occupants moved from opposite the RSL club]
29. F.R.Shaw auction rooms.
30. Laycock's motor garage.
31. J. Davis hire cars
32. F.R.Shaw estate agent.
33. Walker estate agent.
34. Presbyterian Church.
35. Police Station (Sgt Mcpherson). (later moved to corner of Kingsway.)
36. New Picture theatre built 1928. (talkies installed 1932)
37. Printer.
38. Mrs. Slodder dresses.
39. Pickering dentist.
40. T. Turnbull butcher
41. Charlie Hunt barber.
42. Church of England Church. (building moved to Kurnell on completion of new building Kingsway)
43. Dairy Farmer's milk depot.
44. Butcher.
45. Motor garage.
46. Brook's grocer.
47. Methodist Church. (building sold to council 1965 on completion of new church Gosport St.)
48. Cecil Hotel...Ballroom...Cafe .
49. Dr. Miller.
50. Dr. Broome.
51. Dr. Sproule.
52. School of arts.
53. Monro & Buist estate agent.
54. R.T.Waters electrical store,
55. The Ritz. Cafe.
56. Picture show. (moved into new building 1928)
57. Public school (moved into new building 1925)
58. Fire ststion.
59. DeLaurence guest house.
60. Newling Chemist.
61. Businesses & P.O. moved to Curranulla St., during 20's
62. Payne butcher.
63. Private hospital.
64. Ward's store.
65. Sister's of mercy convent.
66. Tram terminus.
67. Shell museum.
68. Congregational Church (Rev.Sands.)
69. Bundeena & National Park ferry wharf.
70. Swimming pool.
71. Laycock's boat shed.
72. Sylvia St. (now Coronation Ave. right through)
73. Curranulla St. (now Cronulla St.)
74. Croydon St. (now Tonkin St. southern end)
75. Agnes Ave. (now Clyde Ave. right through to Allison Rd.)
76. Burraneer Bay Rd. (continued to Kingsway, now St. Andrews place)

NOTE

The map opposite was compiled from information provided by Society member, KEN HEWSON (formerly of Cronulla, who now lives at Junee, NSW), NOEL THORPE, former Chief Survey Draftsman with Sydney Water Board and UNIVERSAL BUSINESS DIRECTORIES who made available some early Gregory's maps.

— Editor

From Page 1

In May 1891 residents of Eckersley raised a petition to the Post Master General's Department seeking the establishment of a Post Office in the settlement. A Postal Inspector visited the area and as a result of his visit a Post Office was opened in September 1891. The first Post Master was John d'Apice who was contracted to carry mails twice a week to Liverpool via Holsworthy for the sum of £30 per annum. At the time the Post Office was opened there were over 100 people living in the settlement.

The original petition is still in existence and contains the signatures of those early settlers along with the names of their vineyards and orchards: Charles Wroblewski from Grodno Vineyard, Leonce Frere was from Monville, his son George owned Beausejour, John Bull ran Gettysburg, and the Testers Pompeii.

Frere's Crossing got its name from George Pierre Frere, originally from France, who took up land at Eckersley between the Georges River and Punchbowl Creek. Here he built a house and established a vineyard that later supplied his wine cellar in Sydney.

Keith Longhurst (a descendant of George and Elizabeth Longhurst who in 1895 took up land near Frere's Crossing) in his article in the Campbelltown and Airs Historical Society Inc. journal "Grist Mills" October 1995, writes about George Frere:

"George Frere sometimes employed Jim Longhurst (one of George and Elizabeth's sons), his brothers and cousins, to help pick grapes during the school holidays. Jim later recalled treading out the grapes in a big vat".

"When we first did it, we thought we'd wash our feet. "What are you doing?" asked Frere. "You do not wash your feet." We ended up getting in just as they were and we used to tread his grapes for him".

After 1906 George Frere sold his portion of land at Eckersley and returned to manage his father's vineyard, St Hilaire near Albury. He died in 1951 at Manly. The remains of George Frere's two houses and wine vats at Eckersley are still in existence.



A Map of the Eckersley Region.

Isaac Himmelhoch, a Polish-born vigneron owned Grodno Vineyard. He constructed a large stone cellar 70 feet long and a number of wells and irrigation channels to supply water to his vines.

A number of illegal stills were in existence around this time and Keith Longhurst writes about Frank and Harry Etchells, neighbours of George Frere having "a rum still concealed under rock ledges near waterfalls at Eckersley". He goes on to say "the rum was a colourless liquid; sometimes Frank coloured it with burnt sugar, but often it was sold as clear spirit". The rum was carried in 4-gallon kerosene tins overland to Bulli where it was sold to the miners for £4 a tin. The rum was known as "3P's" – "Profitable, Private and Pure". The police tried to catch them with their illegal rum but were never successful.

In 1910 Lord Kitchener was on a visit to Australia advising on military matters. On his visit to Liverpool he selected Holsworthy as the site for a permanent Army encampment.

Gradually the settlers started to leave the remote "tiger country" that was Eckersley and as a result of the greatly reduced postal traffic, the Post Office was reduced to a Receiving Office in October 1911. In a report to the Postmaster General there were only 6 letters



The Homestead at Grodno Vineyard

and 2 newspapers handled by the Post Office for the week in January 1912.

Once the Army took possession in 1913, the rural settlement of Eckersley was abandoned forever to the sound of the guns.

Sources:

Staff of the Australia Post Office Historical Office. (No longer in existence)

The National Archives of Australia.



The Bundeena Store – A heritage listed property of Sutherland Shire

A Trip On a Traveling tremor

I lived at Bundeena in 1960 and had risen early enough for a leisurely stroll to the wharf on Wednesday May 25th, I stepped on board, greeted the deckhand and the regulars, then settled into my usual seat up for'ard as the "Curranulla" cast off, skirted Horderns Beach, then headed through a gentle swell towards the narrow 400 metre long channel between Burraneer Point and the wide sand-bank which almost blocks the entrance to Gunnamatta Bay from Daruk Park Westward.

The twenty-five minute ferry trip commuting between Bundeena and Cronulla before and after work was, and I guess still is, an ideal way to prepare for, and to wind down after, the days toil; If we were running a bit late for the morning boat we knew we had to run down the Loftus Street Hill, by the squeals and groans of the mooring ropes straining on their bollards, the bigger the swell the louder the hitches complained.

A Rushing Torrent

We were well into the channel when suddenly it became a rushing torrent, the ferry was making no headway, at full throttle with the whole boat throbbing from stem to stern, the skipper was battling with the wheel to keep us off the rocks to port - which looked bigger than usual, - and the sand bank to starboard - which came perilously close.

Twice we went backward and looked like being swept back into Port Hacking, but our steersman skilfully held her in the channel for what seemed like an age; until gradually the current began to moderate. We slowly made our way onto the calm of the ten metre deep of the bay; now it was some of the passengers who were shaking from stem to stern. If the boat's stern had snagged, that torrent would

have knocked us sideways and could easily have capsized us.

Submarine Earthquake

The cause of the violent current we met was a submarine earthquake of 8.7 on the Richter Scale which had rocked the coast of Chile and dumped a strip of land the equivalent of from Cronulla to Campbelltown wide and from Wollongong to Coffs Harbor long more than two metres downward; causing devastation all along the Chilean shore and sending a series of seismic waves streaking the 11,500 kilometres across the Pacific and mini tidal waves surging across the Darook Sandbank, in minutes instead of hours, and into the deep which is three quarters of the bay.

With equal rapidity Port hacking became the trough of each wave, the only way out for all that water suddenly in the bay was via our navigation channel and we entered it just as one of the surges was on its way out, thus shaking us out of our complacent reveries.

The good people of Sydney Ports Corporation have kindly sent me the Fort Denison tide recording chart for that day "OUR" surge was the one peaking at 6.37am.

Tides permission of the Hydro Survey Coastal Management section of Sydney Ports Authority.

With special thanks to Alison Seale & Ross Henderson of Sydney Ports Corporation.

John Risebrow.

RECORD OF SEISMIC OCEAN WAVES FOLLOWING THE SUBMARINE EARTHQUAKE WHICH OCCURRED IN THE VICINITY OF THE CHILEAN COAST

FORT DENISON

FORENOON
AFTERNOON



THE DUNN'S STEAM PUNT ENGINEERS.

In 1881 Edward John Dunn came to Sylvania to take charge of the first steam punt between Tom Ugly's Point and Horse Rock Point, Sylvania. It could carry 6 vehicles and replaced the old hand-punt of the Holt era which had been in service since 1864. Edward brought his wife, Hannah (nee Barnett) and family from the Ryde/Hunters Hill area where they had been living for about ten years after a few years at Port Stephens. He had experience as an engine driver on a steamer before working at the Albion Steam Saw Mills on the Myall River from May 1869 until April 1872 when he gained a Masters Certificate for Harbour and River vessels. The family settled near the punt ramp in the stone and shingle toll collector's residence which had been removed from the Toll Bar on the Cooks River at Newtown Road, across King Street and opposite the old Deaf and Dumb Institute .

Edward John was born the eldest son of Edward Dunn and his wife Ann (nee Harper) on 3 March 1840 at Parramatta. His father was listed as a shoemaker. having been apprenticed as a young lad to Benjamin Smith in Castlereagh Street and he worked in this and allied tanning trades for most of his life and then as a publican. Edward and Ann would have five sons and one daughter, Emily Jane, who was a sister to five older brothers. Edward senior disappeared from the records in the early 1850s and no definite date of death has been established. though his wife Ann remarried as a widow in 1853, having five more children to Jasper Hale Beer.

The father of Edward and grandfather of Edward John was Thomas Dunn. an Irishman. who was transported to the colony in 1799 for stealing. He worked as a clerk at a brewery in London and was charged with stealing money from a locked storeroom. The money, in rolls of paper, was to be used for wages and Thomas was even charged with stealing the paper in which the stolen coins were wrapped, in total 1452 halfpennies and 216 farthings. He was sent out on the Hillsborough under the command of Captain William Hingston, and endured a terrible journey. Convicts were embarked from the fever-ridden hulks at Langstone Harbour, Portsmouth where Thomas had been held for the past 20 months. With them came typhoid, which resulted in the deaths of 95 of the 300 convicts on board, at least 50 of whom were buried at the Cape of Good Hope. To make matters worse the prisoners were kept double-ironed and when on deck chained together and unable to walk about. They were also underfed and their bedding seldom dry because of stormy weather on the journey from the Cape. Governor Hunter described the survivors as "the most wretched and miserable convicts I have ever beheld, in the most sickly and wretched state".

Thomas survived this tragic beginning and with some education and common sense he set about improving his position in this new land. He worked for settlers and served his sentence, obtaining his Certificate of Freedom on 10 November 1810. By then he was married to Rose Bean. daughter of a free settler, James Thomas John Bean, a carpenter who would later work with masons building the "Rum" Hospital using timber from his own land grant. The wings of this hospital have been used over the years as the Mint Building and the present State Parliament Building.

Thomas and Rose Dunn had eight children between 1804 and 1821. During this period Thomas was appointed a Police Constable in Sydney in 1810, District Constable in 1817 and Chief Constable of Sydney in 1820. The family were well respected and lived for some years in Cumberland Street, The Rocks where Thomas retired on a pension. He died in 1832.

Shortly after Thomas' grandson, Edward John, came to Sylvania, the previous puntmaster of the hand-punt, William Harris, finished his term and the Dunn family joined the two buildings into one to accommodate the family more comfortably. About six Dunn children came to live at the river and three more boys were added to the family during their time there. Eliza was the eldest girl and aged 14 when they moved in. Sixteen years later tragedy would take her from her family. She was suffering from influenza and experienced fainting fits at times. One morning she went out to gather some oysters and half an hour later a lad named Gurr, a neighbour, saw her body floating in shallow water close to the shore between two rocks. He called for help and Eliza's limp body was removed from the water. When Dr. Bucknell arrived, he pronounced her dead. A magisterial inquiry found that she had fainted and fallen into the water whilst stooping for the oysters. According to the newspaper report she was to have been married a few weeks' later.

The following year, 1898, the ferry was replaced as increased traffic had necessitated a larger ferry with greater carrying capacity. Sadly, that year, Edward John died aged 58 and was buried in a double plot at Woronora Cemetery with his daughter Eliza. However Edward Henry, son of Edward John was now 20 years old and following in his father's engineering and boating pursuits. He worked for a time at W. Hodgkinson at St. Peters as an engine driver and fitters assistant, and at the time of his father's death he took over the running of the punt for about a year. Later he operated a punt at Taree, returning to Sydney about 1907 to take up an appointment as engine driver at John Vicar's Woollen Mills at Marrickville where he remained until his retirement.

Edward John's wife, Hannah died in 1916 aged 72 and another of his daughters, Alice, died in 1942 aged 67. These two women are also buried in the double grave at Woronora.

This family had an affinity with water and engines. Two brothers of Edward John were also qualified, Richard as an engineer in Grafton and Frederick as a master mariner and engineer living at Watsons Bay. Edward's two youngest sons, Henry and Albert, also worked as engineers. Edward's sister, Emily Jane, my great grandmother, married a master mariner, Montague Beecroft, the son of a Royal Navy master, Robert Beecroft, whose name is perpetuated in the northern peninsula of Jervis Bay. But details of Robert's adventures and Montague's tragic death on shore are part of another story.

Merle Kavanagh (nee Beecroft)

Sources

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Sydney Morning Herald, Monday 30.8.1897.
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Sutherland Shire Historical Society Quarterly Bulletin. No. 42, p.82 and No. 53, p.130.
Headstone, Woronora Cemetery, Anglican Row F Nos. 50-51.

When Henry Lawson returned to Como

By R. D. (Bob) Walshe OAM

"Henry Lawson is Australia's greatest poet — and the residents of West Como have rolled up today to honour the fact that he spent his late years as a resident at the Bonnet."

With these words, Tom Dalton, MP for Sutherland, opened the free 'Henry Lawson Concert' on Sunday 18th September 1954. An open-air event on the reserve off Wolger Street, it attracted a crowd of 600 and was reported widely in the press.

The program was aggressively Australian. The original Bushwhackers Band played Lawson ballads (Cobb & Co.', 'Reedy River'). Poet Muir Holburn praised Lawson on behalf of the Fellowship of Australian Writers. Members of the Association of Australian Dancers led woolshed and other folk dances. A cast of 25 Sutherland High School boys performed their play, 'Saltbush Bill's Second Fight'.

The local Observer newspaper (23.9.54) reported a "riotous conclusion was provided by the Bushwhackers, who drew the audience into choruses of 'Lazy Harry's' and 'Click Go the Shears'" - and encores were demanded, which brought the band back to play 'Botany Bay', 'Wild Rover' and 'Waltzing Matilda' ... A collection of nearly fifteen pounds showed the audience's appreciation.

Como resident and Bonnet pioneer, elderly Fred Hall, who described himself as "one of Lawson's mates", in a brief and halting statement presented "recollections of Lawson at Como" and he passed around a small, faded photo of the bush timber railing which he said Henry had constructed beside a short walkway from his cottage to a rock where he would sit, look at the Woronora River, and write poetry (on the easterly side of the Bonnet). Lawson died in 1922.

The concert was so successful that another was organised in 1955, and thereafter each year up to 1960 – seven in all.

Many notables gladly associated themselves with the concerts — federal politicians Les Haylen and Les Johnson, for instance. A young MP by the name of E. G. Whitlam was set to address the 1955 Concert but at the last moment telegraphed to say he was "confined to his bed". Historian Dr Colin Roderick often attended. So did famous actor-reciter Leonard Thiele and educationist Donald McLean.

The grand old lady of Australian poetry, Dame Mary Gilmore, having heard of the 1954 Concert, wrote in 1955 that she recalled a visit she had paid to Henry in his "historic Bonnet hut" with Lawson's mother Louisa Lawson.

Attempts to have very elderly Bertha Lawson, Henry's wife, make the trip to Como were frustrated by her ill-health. In 1956 a letter from that other writer,

Will Lawson, said, "Mrs Bertha Lawson ... is far too shaky to be there. You might express her regret to the gathering." Bertha died the next year.

It was a pity she missed the 1956 concert. As the Daily Telegraph reported: "Despite showers and cold winds, more than 1000 people yesterday paid tribute at Como to Australian poet Henry Lawson" (24.9.56)

Children of West Como Primary School did not perform at the 1954 Concert. But they presented items in later years -- choir, dance, recitations and plays. And more than half of the audiences always consisted of the school's pupils.

Sutherland Shire Council was involved with the concerts from the first, usually providing staging and sound equipment. Councillor Bill Piesley, opening the 1957 Concert, said: 'The Council regards this Annual Concert not only as an adornment of Lawson's honoured memory or of Como's past, but as an adornment of our Shire's unique traditions. For 1955, Council at the prompting of MP Tom Dalton had the concert area proclaimed the Henry Lawson Reserve, and provided a handsome sign to that effect.

Why did the concerts not continue beyond 1960? ... The hard work of organising!

As a Como resident (from 1948) and a history teacher at Sutherland High School (from 1952), I had proposed the organising of the '54 concert to Como West Progress Association. It was eagerly supported and there was always help in distributing a leaflet and in setting up the staging on the big day. But the work of devising a program, contacting performers, selling ads to finance the leaflet, and much else, continued to fall on me. By 1960 I had heavy work and family commitments. No one, alas, could be found to take over the work.

It was a pity, for the event could have become permanent ... Yet, who knows? Times change. By 1960, TV had been in vogue for four years, producing a sophistication in entertainment that might not have chimed with our earthy real-life presentation. And every household (almost) had acquired a car, which meant tripping of a weekend. A certain "pioneer" sense had left Como – few vacant lots remained.

Still, I'd love to see a revival in some form of Como's Lawson remembrance. Who, I wonder, might take up that challenge in this 77th anniversary of Lawson's death and 50th anniversary of West Como Public School?

After teaching for 12 years at Sutherland and Port Hacking High Schools, Mr Walshe turned to writing and publishing. He is Patron of the NSW Total Environment Centre and has for eight years been Chairman of Sutherland Shire Environment Centre. – Ed.

A Note from the President – As Chair of the "Heritage Festival" and "Centenary of Federation Committee", I can inform you that the "Henry Lawson Festival" is to be held in 2001 as a Centenary event in Como and of course Bob Walshe will be involved in its planning

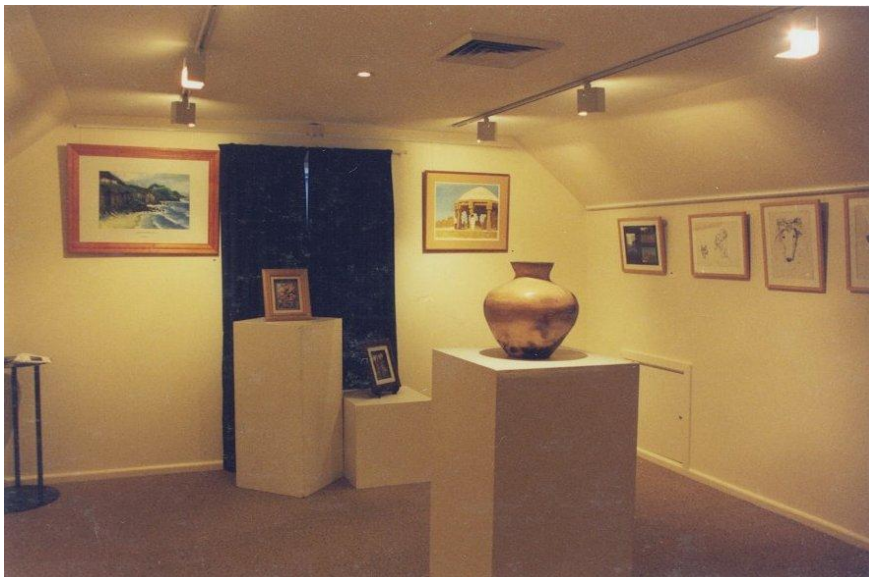
– Dawn Emerson

The Evolution of Hazelhurst



Original gates and
grounds of Hazelhurst

Construction Phase
of the Gallery



Refurbished interior
of the "Old House"

Sutherland Shire
Historical Society
Bulletin