

ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL. 1. NO. 5.

BI-MONTHLY BULLETIN

GRATIS.

JUNE 1963.

53 Bruce Street,
Bexley.
14th June, 1963.

Dear Friend and Member,

The next meeting of the above Society will be held as follows:-

DATE: FRIDAY EVENING NEXT, 21st JUNE, 1963, at 8 p.m.

PLACE: COUNCIL CHAMBER, Town Hall, ROCKDALE.

SPEAKER: MR. PHILIP GEEVES WILL SPEAK ON
"EARLY BEXLEY"

It is hoped to follow Mr. Geeves' talk with an outing around some of the more interesting and historic houses in Bexley.

All members are particularly requested to attend this meeting as it will be necessary to elect a new President of the Society in succession to the late Mr. J.I. Swann.

A light supper will be served.

R.W. RATHBONE.
Hon. Secretary.
LW.4813.

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VALE JOHN ISAAC SWANN.

The sudden death of the President of the St. George Historical Society, Mr. J.I. Swann, has left in our ranks a large gap which will be extremely difficult to fill. Since its inception some two years ago, Mr. Swann was the driving force and inspiration of this Society.

Those of us who were privileged to know him away from meetings of the Society, as a friend and as a neighbour, cannot speak too highly of this very forthright, public spirited and far sighted old gentleman whose love for the history of the St. George and Parramatta Districts was infectious.

Perhaps this is not surprising when it is realised that it was Mr. Swann's schoolteacher father who many years ago rescued derelict Elizabeth Farm House at Parramatta, Australia's oldest and most historic building, from the hands of the demolisher and raised a large family within its walls.

Mr. Swann's eldest sister, Miss Margaret Swann, whose death was announced only last week, founded the Parramatta Historical Society. For many years she was its President and the late James Jervis, its secretary.

Many tributes have already been paid to Mr. Swann in the various capacities in which he served this community and it remains only for this Society, which he founded and which absorbed his time and his interest in the last years of his life, to say John Isaac Swann, we honour you.

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FROG HOLLOW

ROCKDALE 70 YEARS AGO.

Reprinted from the "Rockdale Times" of April 17, 1947.

This account of the early history of Rockdale deals with the period over 70 years ago, when a fine orchard flourished where the Town Hall now rears its proportions; from the Grand Hotel to Bay Street was called "Frog Hollow", and the oldest blackfellow at Sans Souci was named Jimmy Lownes.

Our historian, Mr. Joseph Bowmer, is 89 years of age, but has a memory like that of a schoolboy. He is not so old, except in years -- his mental outlook is surprisingly modern. He says:

I will start at Wickham Street, Arncliffe, near the Public School, which is on the Terry Estate. On the southern side of what is now called Princes Highway (late Rocky Point Road), stretched the Terry Estate, except for Mrs. Vincent's property at the corner of Spring Street and Rocky Point Road. Opposite Vincents lived the large Lawrence family, their land finishing at the Free Church. Next was Mr. Lauson's orchard. Mr. Iliffe had a large nursery, followed (as we pass to Rockdale), by Frank's beautiful orchard, where the present Town Hall stands. Another orchard extended to the hotel site, and was owned and worked by Mr. William Bray.

From Bray's Lane to Bay Street was called "Frog Hollow", as it nearly always was full of water and frogs, and eels used to be caught there.

A gentleman named Campbell owned from Chapel Lane to the old fire station; then came John Andrew's property. His wife had the first drapery shop here, while he conducted a denominational school next door.

From there to the stormwater channel was Mr. Sam Schofield's - an orchard and vegetable garden extending as far as the present-day Ashton Street. His brother had an orchard and garden to Beach Street; and a Mr. Podmore owned from this point to the site of Moorefield racecourse.

Mr. Bowmer then gives us details of the properties on the eastern side of Rocky Point Road.

The hotel at Arncliffe was kept by a Mrs. Clune, and had a large area of land attached. Sheath's land came next, and the next again extended to where Rickett & Thorp's factory is -- a vegetable garden belonging to Mr. Touchell. On the adjoining property the first Rockdale shop was erected -- a general store run by Mr. Moss, who had a vegetable garden around it, and looked after both personally. Then came Soden's orchard; and Humphrey's property reached to the corner of Tramway Arcade and the main road. Here Rockdale's second general store was opened by Mr. Yeoman Geeves, who also conducted the post office.

The story then tells how Rockdale came to be so-called (see Mr. Fred Geeves' reminiscences in our last issue).

Continuing, Mr. Bowmer says a Mr. Waltz owned the next block as far as Napper's store; and the ambulance station site belonged to Mr. Fred Barden. This gentleman owned a vegetable garden and slaughterhouse here, and a butcher's shop at Cooks River. Then came Skidmore's land - he and his sons gardened, and also carted wood to the city. The bridge over the watercourse was known as "Skidmore's Bridge".

One of the pioneers, Mr. James Beehag, owned from Rocky Point Road down Bay Street to what is now James Street, where the hospital stands, and his area took in the swamp land, now Draper's nursery. He had four boys and two girls and divided the property between them, reserving portion as a gift to the Methodist Church, in Bay Street.

On the west side of West Botany Street a Mr. Warren had a large market garden, and the next again was Mr. Chas. Napper's; then Wilson's garden; and at the rear of this Mr. John Bowmer, Snr., tilled a market garden. From there on to Bestic Street belonged to Mr. Foulks, who gave portion of the West Botany

Methodist Church. Following this was Wilmot's, then Mr. William Beehag's farm, while Mr. James Beehag owned from Bay Street to March Street.

The other side of March Street was a bullock paddock owned by Mr. McGuinness, who also conducted the hotel at Cooks River. The next settler was Mr. Lankorn; then Mr. Terry, as far as Spring Street; from hereto Tabrett Street was William Beehag's; to Bestic Street, Mr. Godfrey's; to Bryant Street, Mr. Foulks', and from Bryant Street to Bay Street, Mr. James Quirk. All were market gardens and orchards.

Rockdale Park is part of the old Quirk's Estate.

The only outlet from the beach was Bay Street. At Rocky Point Road end, a cliff of rocks blocked the way, so a track was used through private land. Mr. Saywell cut through this cliff for his tram line.

The only private property on the beach was where the Brighton Hotel stands, and it was owned by Mr. Hook, who had slaughter-houses at Marrickville, a slaughter-house where Sydenham Station now is; and butcheries in the city.

The bush from Cooks River to Ramsgate was called "No-man's land" and firewood could be cut without licence, and sold. Barton Park was a swamp, partly covered with ti-tree and swamp oak.

It was a great place for snakes, and there were ducks, snipe, plovers, and curlews for the sportsman. A colony of flying-foxes lived here.

The largest tree in Rockdale was blackbutt, on Godfrey's property, known as Avenel Estate. It was 200 feet high. Mr. Godfrey had it felled, used the top as firewood for his boiling-down works, and had the barrel blasted asunder with "black-jack" for posts and rails. A photo of the old stump may be seen at Mr. F. Beehag's office.

In these days there was no gas, and no laid-on water this side of Cooks River.

Black's camps existed at Blakehurst and Sans Souci. They were later moved to La Perouse. Jimmy Lownes was the oldest aborigine at Sans Souci, and the boys of the village used to enjoy visiting him.

Mr. Joe Bowmer's father came to Australia from England in 1853. He was in the formation of West Botany Municipal district, and was elected alderman in 1875. He was Mayor for 1877, and the six years following. In 1885 he was appointed a Justice of the Peace. At the Wesleyan Church he was a frequent preacher. He had 10 children.

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