

ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL 1. NO. 6.

BI-MONTHLY BULLETIN

GRATIS.

AUGUST 1963.

53 Bruce Street,

BEXLEY.

9th August, 1963.

Dear Friend and Member,

Notice is hereby given that the

ANNUAL MEETING

of the above Society will be held as follows:-

DATE: FRIDAY EVENING, 16th AUGUST, 1963, at 8 p.m.

PLACE: COUNCIL CHAMBER, Town Hall, Rockdale.

SPEAKER: Mr. F.A. LARCOMBE, M.Ec., University tutor and expert on the history of Local Government will speak on

"Some Aspects of the History of Public Health in N.S.W. over the Last 100 Years."

All members and their friends are particularly requested to attend this meeting.

A light supper will be served.

T. J. McCARTHY
President.

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

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SOCIETY ELECTS NEW PRESIDENT.

Mr. T.J. McCarthy of Bexley is the new President of the St. George Historical Society in succession to the late Mr. J.I. Swann.

A former Mayor of Rockdale, Mr. McCarthy was the original patron of the Society which was formed as a result of a public meeting called during his term as Mayor.

Mr. McCarthy comes from one of the oldest families in Bexley, his father taking up land along the Forest Road well before the turn of the century.

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ST. GEORGE NOW AFFILIATED WITH ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Largely due to the efforts of Mr. Geeves, the St. George Historical Society is now affiliated with the Royal Historical Society.

This will enable us to receive the Society's Journal and Proceedings and also to call upon the many interesting speakers the Society provides.

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BRIGHTON - LE - SANDS.

A Suburb Evolved From The Sand-Hills.

The development of Brighton-le-Sands as one of Sydney's first "model" suburbs was due, almost entirely, to the enterprise of one man. That man was Thomas Saywell. Nowhere in Sydney has the name of one man been so extensively associated with the progress of a particular area and yet, oddly enough, no trace of his name will be found in any street, park, building or other place in the district.

Perhaps the best memorial to his pioneering influence at Brighton is the grand avenue of Norfolk Island pine trees that form such a landmark at the Beach, and which Saywell was himself responsible for planting there over seventy years ago.

To trace the suburban beginnings of Brighton, it is necessary to look back to the eighties of the last century. Brighton really began as an off-shoot of Rockdale. Prior to 1870, most of the first settlers lived along Muddy Creek and Rocky Point Road. A mere handful of people, they were mostly market gardeners, timber getters and poultry or pig farmers.

Thoroughfares in those days were mere cart tracks. One of them wound down over a hill from Rockdale, across a swamp and petered out in the sandhills near the beach. Today we know this track as Bay Street. Another track was made from West Botany Street, across Muddy Creek towards the beach. It was originally called Goode Street but afterwards re-christened Bestic Street.

Eighty years ago the last sign of civilization on the Bay side of Rockdale were Francis's duck farm about half a mile back from the beach and the lonely home of a German butcher, George Hook, on the site of the present Brighton Public School.

The area that was to eventually become Brighton-le-Sands then comprised part of a great belt of wilderness varying from half a mile to a mile in width, and extending parallel with Lady Robinson's Beach from Cooks River right through to Dolls Point and Sandringham. No one except a few wandering bands of blacks or an odd fisherman lived in that huge tract of virgin country. For the most part it was inhospitable; comprising arid stretches of sandhills, a dense blanket of scrub and thick forest. The part where Brighton now stands was actually described as a "desert" at one time. This hungry waterless region was certainly unattractive to the pioneers for most farming purposes. They preferred the rich soil along the flats of Muddy Creek.

Between 1870 and 1880 two historic events occurred which tended towards more attention being given to settlement along the beach. The first was the incorporation of the Municipality of West Botany and the second was the naming of Lady Robinson's Beach. Hitherto that great length of sea-washed strand was popularly spoken of as Seven-Mile Beach - although actually it is less than five miles long.

Its official title commemorates the name of the wife of the Governor of N.S.W. from 1872 to 1879, Sir Hercules Robinson. The person responsible for the naming was Thomas Holt, M.L.C., one-time Colonial Treasurer, the wealthy pioneer who once lived at Sylvania and owned most of Sutherland Shire.

The story goes that Holt was host to a large picnic party at the beach one day in the seventies, his guests including the Governor and his lady. It was Lady Robinson's admiration of the local silver sands that caused the beach to be named after her. Thence afterwards, it became her ladyship's favourite resort for horseback riding.

Between 1882 and 1890, the Colonial Government acquired more than 600 acres of what is now North Brighton and Kyeemagh for use as a "farm" for the southern outfall of Sydney's early sewerage system. This did not enhance its popularity and for several decades after 1882 it remained the dead-end of the Municipality, a bar to local settlement and inter-suburban communication.

At this stage of our story Thomas Saywell comes upon the scene.

Thomas Saywell was born in Nottingham, England, and educated in France. In 1848 at the age of eleven years, he arrived in Sydney. Saywell first achieved prominence in 1881 when, in partnership with Sir Hugh Dixon, he floated the Saywell Tobacco Company and very soon cornered a large share of the Australian Market. He also founded the Clifton and South Clifton Collieries and the Vale of Clwydd Coal Company. He owned the Zig Zag Coal Company and erected the huge Bellambi ocean jetty near South Bulli at a cost of £40,000. He founded the Eagle and Standard Brick Companies and had large interests in the copper mines at Cobar.

Thomas Saywell was a director of a number of Sydney Companies and was one of the city's leading commercial personalities.

In the early 1880's Saywell bought about 100 acres of the wilderness and sandhills facing the beach and extending from Bay Street to Bestic Street for £1,000. On portion of this land he built an hotel which in those days cost in the vicinity of £20,000. He also acquired a large area of land to the south of Bay Street.

It is quite possible that even before he took up this land Saywell could foresee the improvements and facilities he was later to establish there.

The leading factor which no doubt influenced his decision to open up the beach was the commencement of the construction of the Illawarra Suburban Railway. The first length as far as Hurstville was opened in 1884 but twelve months before this event Saywell had approached the authorities for permission to construct and maintain a tramway along Bay Street from the proposed Rockdale Station to Lady Robinson's Beach.

On March 6, 1884, a special Act of Parliament was passed granting him the right to make and maintain the tramway and to run it for a period of 30 years.

Some of the preliminary work done to open up the beach area included the forming of Bay Street right through to the beach and the levelling and clearing of the extensive sandhills. Side streets and a short section of the Grand Parade were formed later and in 1885 construction of the first half of the big swimming baths at the beach was begun, together with a long pier which was to separate, on final completion, the women's and men's sections. About that time Saywell's steam tramway was being built and in the decade between 1885 and 1895 he expended thousands of pounds to make Brighton a model suburb.

The swimming baths were a particular innovation in those pre-surfing days, there being only two or three others in the whole city. Saywell spent several thousand pounds on those baths. Constructed almost entirely of timber and corrugated iron, the first half had an enclosure of between 250 and 300 square feet. All along the sides were dressing cubicles and there was a refreshment room at the entrance. Its freshwater showers and hot sea-water baths were a novelty for those days. The latter were claimed to be a "sure cure for rheumatic complaints". Women were permitted to use the enclosure from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. each day and men before and after those hours. As many as one thousand people crowded the enclosure at one time.

In 1887 the second half of the baths was built separated from the first portion by a huge promenade pier. This pier became, apart from anything else, a popular spot among rod and line fishermen.

Admittance to the baths was twopence for adults and a penny for children or else portion of the combined rail-tram-baths (or still later, rail-tram-racecourse-baths) ticket could be used.

People came from many suburbs of Sydney, especially Newtown and such places to bathe and picnic at the beach. The old horse-drawn coaches alone used to bring crowds of people from outlying areas. Every Sunday morning a special train was run from Redfern, at six-thirty returning at 8 a.m. so that hundreds of before-breakfast dippers could sample the briny.

Perhaps the best remembered feature of these baths was a large, long sign in feet high lettering painted on the galvanised iron sheets enclosing the women's baths. As people walked along the jetty they read "Blackguards peep in, gentlemen pass on" all of which seems to have been a little unnecessary when it is realised that a woman's bathing attire in sharp contrast to that worn by the men covered their entire form from neck to ankle and filled out like a balloon when they were in the water.

The first lessee to take charge of Saywell's Baths was the well-remembered Lieutenant F.A. Von Hammer, a noted swimming instructor who was formerly at the Domain Baths and later at Manly.

Early patrons included the famous Australian athletes "Snowy" Baker and Fred Lane, Jack Hellings and Ken Chambers. Miss Annette Kellerman (champion lady swimmer), Peter Jackson (coloured boxer) and many other notables had many swims in the old baths.

Thomas Saywell retained ownership of the baths until 1921.

In the early part of 1886, the Government resumed the whole length of Lady Robinson's Beach and a narrow strip of land behind it and from thence on it was called Cook Park. This reserve was originally 105 acres in extent - one of the longest park areas in Sydney but over the years much of it has been washed back into the Bay.

The hotel which Saywell erected at Brighton and which he called the "New Brighton" Hotel was a "grand" hotel in every sense of the word. Built in graceful Italian Style it was claimed to be the finest in the colony. It comprised about eighty compartments, including forty bedrooms and a large billiard room with two tables. From its tower a fine panoramic view of Botany Bay and the surrounding country could be obtained. Set back in extensive gardens with artistically arranged shrubs and trees it had the appearance of an oasis amid the surrounding dunes of sand.

At the rear of the building stood a large pavilion.

In the nineties the Hotel was conducted by a Mr. Harry Figg who gave it the rather quaint name of "The Lick-House Hotel" but one of the oddest and least known facts about it was that in 1892 it became the first home for the Scots' College.

For some reason the hotel lost its licence and the premises were rented by Rev. A.A. Aspinall a Presbyterian Minister. From distinctly modest beginnings the school grew, its chief attraction being its proximity to the baths. Unfortunately for the moral welfare of the boys, a racecourse was established nearby attracting an element which was described as extremely undesirable. In any case the waters of Botany Bay "were unsuitable for rowing for the boys being too shallow and often treacherous" and the site of the college was both bleak and windy. Aspinall packed up his college in 1896 and moved it to its present location at Bellevue Hill. The licence was restored and it operates as a public house to this day.

The hotel was once the rendezvous of various celebrities in the sporting world. Several famous boxers resided there and trained in the pavilion at the rear during the late eighties and early nineties. Among them were the former world feather-weight champion Albert (Griffo) Griffiths and Dan Creedon. The great Tommy Burns also trained there, and it was at the Brighton Hotel too that the famous coloured boxer, Peter Jackson took up residence after his return to Australia in 1899.

The pavilion which stood at the rear of the hotel was an enormous structure - 170 feet long and 41 feet wide with a high domed ceiling and minareted towers. It could accommodate 1,500 people and what was perhaps its most amazing feature, it was lit by electricity.

In later years this remarkable building was used for roller skating, dancing, concerts and boxing.

In 1887 Saywell moved from his home at Petersham and took up residence in The Grand Parade. From that date until the turn of the century he had various streets opened up and many cottages erected. The imposing terrace which still fronts The Grand Parade is but one of these projects.

Other enterprises initiated by Saywell during these years include a series of bores which he had sunk in the sand beds to ensure a reliable water supply and the placing of a number of ancient pieces of cannonry beneath the pine trees facing the beach - for decoration or protection, we are not quite sure.

One of the most popular features of the resort was the steamboat service which operated between the pier and Saywell's baths and Kurnell, Botany and Sans Souci. Cruises on the "S.S. Erina" were the highlight of any visit to Brighton.

Until the late 1880's all Saywell's improvements took place north of Bay Street but as the nineteenth century drew to a close he developed south of Bay Street an establishment called "Shady Nook". This was a park and pleasure ground which occupied the corner of The Grand Parade and Bay Street opposite the hotel. Its features included shady trees, wide expanses of grass, old tram cars as shelter sheds, a merry-go-round, seesaws, swings, a bandstand and a refreshment kiosk. In the refreshment room was opened Brighton's first post office.

Another uncatalogued attraction was presence of large numbers of bushes bearing a fleshy berry called "Five-corners". These were much sought after by children and were often sold to supplement their pocket money. Encounters with snakes and bull-ants, both of which abounded in the area appeared to hold little terror for the children who ravaged the area armed with bags and tins.

The following description of Brighton and Saywell's part in developing it appeared in the "Sydney Morning Herald" late in 1889.

"Mr. Saywell has, with unstinted energy laid out sufficient money to all but perfect the requirements of a watering place. Viewing the young township of New Brighton as a whole, it affords only another instance of the surprising rapidity with which, by judicious outlay of capital in suburban Sydney, substantial townships and rapidly increasing populations take the place of barren bush and wild, seemingly valueless stretches of country."

The racecourse previously mentioned, like all Saywell's enterprises, was quite remarkable by contemporary standards. To construct it he had to level a sand-hill which was something of a landmark on the site. The frontage was to Bay Street with the western side limited by what is now Francis Avenue. Although not large, it was more than ample for pony, galloway and trotting events. For privacy a twelve foot fence was erected around it. In between race meetings the oval in the centre of the course served the purpose of a football and cricket field, an arena for pigeon shooting matches and a parade ground for the St. George Regiment.

In 1911, however the racecourse was sold and Princess Street, Gordon Street and Moate Avenue extended across its environs.

Because the name New Brighton caused confusion with a smaller Brighton being developed near Manly the name was changed in 1900 to the present distinctive title of "Brighton-le-Sands".

This description has purposely omitted a detailed account of Mr. Saywell's tramway because this has been treated in great detail in other publications. It will suffice to say that in 1900 also, Saywell sold his original steam tram engines the "Saywell" and the "Pigmy" and had his system electrified. He converted portion of his stables at the rear of the hotel into a power house which contained a steam engine generator and many large storage batteries. Saywell used power from his plant to light many homes and business premises in the district as well and it was not until the advent of the St. George County Council in 1920 that this plant ceased to operate.

By 1911, the racecourse was closed and in June 1914, the State Government took over the tramway. A few years later he sold the baths and after offering it to the Rockdale Council first, sold and subdivided "Shady Nook".

In 1926 after thirty-nine years residence, Thomas Saywell moved to Mosman where he died two years later at the great age of 91.

By his death there passed from the commercial life of Sydney a most picturesque personality and whilst the years have dimmed many of the memories of his business enterprises, Brighton-le-Sands, the model suburb which his courage, foresight and enterprise developed from a waste of sand and scrub, remains his enduring memorial.

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OUTING TO BEXLEY.

The next outing of the St. George Historical Society will be to Bexley where Mr. Philip Geeves and Mr. T.J. McCarthy will be our guides

1. Meet at the Rockdale Town Hall on Saturday afternoon,
AUGUST 10th, 1963, at 2 p.m.
2. Proceed to 51 Villiers Street for an outside inspection of the 100 year old Lauff Family home. This building, constructed of enormous sandstone blocks still stands in its original condition, complete with sandstone flag stones.
3. Then proceed via Arlington, Herbert, Tyrrell, and Frederick Streets, Linwood Avenue and Harrow Road to the Lucy Gullett Hospital - former home of the wealthy McLeod family, built in the early 1880's and still in an excellent state of repair. Inspection of the grounds and exterior only.
4. Proceed on foot along Albyn Street (No. 18 was built in 1884 and is reputed to be the first house built on the vast Ocean View Estate ... the high picket fence is as old as the house) to Christ Church, Church of England (1887) with its splendid collection of stained glass windows. Down Dunmore Street and into Monomeeth Street where you will see one of the best collections of Victoriana in the St. George District all in an excellent state of repair.
5. At Harrow Road you will also see a number of what were previously some of the finest homes in the district.
6. From Harrow Road we continue by car to Lydham Hall, 18 Lydham Avenue, Rockdale ..., the magnificent sandstone mansion now undergoing extensive renovation which commands some of the most panoramic views in the district. This building, 106 years old, stands on the highest point of the ridge between Cooks River and Georges River.

Here we will have afternoon tea.

BRING Your camera, your binoculars and something to eat.
Tea will be provided.

Friends will be most welcome and if you have any problems ring the Secretary at LW.4813.

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