

ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL 1. NO. 7.

BI-MONTHLY BULLETIN

GRATIS.

OCTOBER 1963

53 Bruce Street,
BEXLEY.

11th October, 1963.

Dear Friend and Member,

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

DATE: FRIDAY EVENING NEXT, 18th October, 1963, at 8 P.M.

PLACE: ST. GEORGE COUNTY COUNCIL AUDITORIUM, Montgomery Street, Kogarah.

SPEAKER: Our Guest Speaker will be

MR. W. FOSTER, M.A., F.R.A.H.S.

Headmaster of the James Cook High School, Kogarah.

who will speak on -

"SIR THOMAS LIVINGSTONE MITCHELL"

the man who built the Forest Road.

All members and any interested friends are cordially invited to attend.

A light supper will be served.

T. J. McCARTHY

President.

R. W. RATHBONE

Hon. Secretary

LW 4813.

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SUCCESSFUL OUTING TO BEXLEY.

On Saturday, 10th August, 1963, a very good attendance of members was conducted on a guided tour of Bexley by the President of the Society, Mr. T. J. McCarthy, and the District Historian, Mr. Philip Geeves.

Commencing at the Lauff family home in Villiers Street, Rockdale, members proceeded to Harrow Road where they walked around the block past "Clyde" the oldest house on the Ocean View Estate and paused for a short inspection of the magnificent collection of stained glass windows in Christ Church, Church of England.

An inspection was made of the exterior of "Del Monte", Monomeeth Street, and the Lucy Gullett House, formerly "Dunvegan", home of the McLeods. The party then proceeded to "Lydham Hall" the lovely old sandstone home set atop the highest point of the ridge between Cooks River and Georges River. A thorough inspection was made of the building and the heroic efforts being made by its owners Mr. and Mrs. G. Long, to restore it to its original condition brought widespread praise from the visitors.

It was at this point that afternoon tea was taken concluding a most enjoyable outing.

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TRIP TO PARRAMATTA POSTPONED.

Because of the holiday weekend the proposed trip to Parramatta had to be postponed.

It is now hoped to make this trip in the near future. We will be visiting Old Government House, The Lancer Barracks, Hambeldon Cottage, Elizabeth Farm and the newly restored Experiment Farm Cottage.

Unfortunately, this trip will have to be made on a Sunday - all day - as it is impossible to see all these things on a short Saturday afternoon and impracticable to arrange a smaller tour.

A minimum of 30 starters is necessary to make this trip a success and an indication of those interested will be sought at the meeting.

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DISTRICT TO LOSE TWO OF ITS MOST HISTORIC BUILDINGS.

Unless it receives another last minute reprieve, lovely "Rosevale Villa", for more than ninety years a landmark at the entrance to Rockdale Shopping Centre will soon disappear to make way for a service station.

Persistent efforts by this Society to the Rockdale Council for removal of the building have been met with marked indifference and in some cases open hostility.

The Oil Company which has bought the site on which "Rosevale Villa" stands has agreed to give the building to the Council and take the utmost care in its demolition provided the Council removes and stores it.

The Council is now trying to have the stones marked free of cost in case it ever is re-erected but from the current temper of the Council this would appear to be a forlorn hope.

The second landmark to go will be the old Brickwood family home in Turrella Street, Arncliffe, which stands in the way of proposed new extensions of the National Cash Register Factory.

This building is about 80 years old and quite unique in that it is the only known building in the St. George District with a covered courtyard and it is suspected, one of the very few in Australia with this distinction.

All this adds up to the very great need of this Society to educate the leaders of the Community and the public at large to the value of these buildings. Practically all the buildings of note in the Rockdale Municipality at least are in areas zoned for industrial, commercial or home unit purposes. All are in the gravest danger of being valued out of existence unless the authorities can be persuaded to acquire at least a selection of them for public purposes.

If this Society is to be anything more than a name it must act now before it is too late.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION OF PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES BEFORE 1896.

Lecture by Mr. F. A. Larcombe, M.E.c., Lecturer at University of Technology

Government interest in public health administration is a comparatively recent development. It was not until 1848 that the first general legislation was passed in England. A cholera epidemic in 1831 and the insanitary conditions existing in the new industrial towns forced the Imperial Government to set up a Board of Health as a central authority. Prior to 1848 public health control was not a municipal function and the new legislation attempted to repair this important omission by providing for municipalities voluntarily to constitute themselves as local boards of health. Public health development in England was to a large extent responsible for an impetus to a similar movement in New South Wales. There is sufficient evidence to show that some measures of public health control had already been introduced in New South Wales prior to the advent of municipal Government. Building regulation dates back to 1834. By the "fifties" there was a quarantine officer and a board to check the qualification of persons practising as doctors. Acts had also been passed to regulate a variety of public health matters, ranging from cattle slaughtering, beer adulteration, to the provision of a supply of pure water by the Sydney Municipal Council. In fact one of the earliest prosecutions for the violation of public health regulations occurred when one George Brown, an employee of Peters, the nightman, polluted the Sydney water supply. An account of the case states that "it appeared that no less a quantity than 67 tons of night soil had within one week been deposited within a quarter of a mile of the tunnel whence the city is supplied with water" and that "during the late heavy rains large quantities had been washed away from the spot at which it was put down, towards the tunnel, the liquid portion of which had filtrated through the porous earth into the reservoir whence the city is supplied with water". The penalty was 4/6 with 15/6 costs. The Magistrate did intimate, however, "that in the event of any similar offence being in future committed a much heavier penalty would be imposed".

The early attempts at public health control were spasmodic and unco-ordinated. It was the "Herald" which first noted these barriers to an efficient system. In 1857, just prior to the restoration of the Sydney Municipal Council, which had been superseded by an appointed Commission, the "Herald" had advocated central direction of public health administration. "If the inhabitants of the British Metropolis are so deeply sensible to the importance of sanitary progress as to employ 47 medical officers of health, cannot the wealthy prosperous city of Sydney afford to employ one? Notwithstanding the immense advantages possessed by Sydney in an elevated position and in the enjoyment of salubrious sea breezes the annual death rate was eleven per cent. above that of London with its fogs, its factories, its oceans of smoke, and its aggregation of three millions of inhabitants."

The "Herald's" request for a more definite form of public health administration could not have been made at a more opportune time. At the time the legislation for the restoration of the City Council was before the Legislative Council. When the clauses empowering the City Council to appoint certain officers were being debated, Dr. Douglass drew attention to the need for an officer of Health, "one of the most necessary functionaries that could be attached to the Corporation." As a result, provision was made for the compulsory appointment of an Officer of Health, a fully qualified medical practitioner charged with such important duties as the ascertainment of the existence and character of diseases, and their eradication, the ventilation of schools, lodging houses and public building and the extirpation of nuisances. Naturally the "Herald" was pleased with the new provision for public health control. It promised to support any candidate for alderman however radical if he would "show himself best acquainted with the material wants of the City" and was "qualified to take the lead as a sanitary reformer." Citizens generally were ignorant of the "verdant side of life" and the deplorable neglect of the laws of health, the toleration of festering wretchedness at our very doors has long been a disgrace as it has now become a danger to the city."

Dr. Isaac Aarons was the first appointment, and there was plenty of scope for him to display his talents. Sydney, at the time had been described as a "city of privies and of noisome and infectious gully holes", it being virtually "impossible for a person with humane feelings to pass along the lower

part of Hunter Street -- without a feeling of deep commiseration for the unfortunate inhabitants who from choice or necessity have pitched their tents in such a locality, and on whom, from the pallid and emaciated aspect of many of them, especially the children" it was evident that "the atmospheric poison" was "doing its deadly work". It was considered impossible for a person with a normal sense of smell to walk the streets in the lower and more crowded areas without becoming aware of the need for sanitary reforms. An article, "Social Cesspools of Sydney", describing the Rocks, "the habitual resorts of vicious and filthy humanity" emphasises further the need for public health control. "The streets are scarcely traversable by vehicles and destitute of all signs of forming, metalling, guttering, sewerage. The houses which line them are small and comparatively ancient stone cottages, so unevenly and irregularly built that the doorstep of one residence sometimes approximates to the eaves of another. Where the erections are of wood their dilapidated, filthy appearance is all the more striking. The interior of these abodes usually consists of two dirty, bare rusty-coloured chambers of small size yet too large for the scanty articles which their furniture" -- their inhabitants -- "the unhappy debouched wicked face, the slovenly dirtily clothed persons --." There was a general absence of drainage. "The foul drainage of one cottage trickles down the hill till it encounters the back or front wall of the house next below; here it accumulates, soaking down to the foundations or sometimes actually running in at the door. In other houses the occupants have prevented this accumulation by constructing a drain close beneath the floor, and running quite through the house. Certainly a flowing stream of filth is to be preferred to a stagnant pool. The various rejectamenta of more solid nature which lie about the yards and streets where they chance to fall, of course add to the foul appearance and smell."

What were the results of Sydney's first experiments with public health administration? In favour of Dr. Aarons it must be said that he did not intend to remain a consultant in an office. Evidence reveals his diligence in his work, and that he was able to pursue his investigations without objections, proving that there was "no fanatical love of dirt amongst the poorest of the city population." Little had ever been done about housing, and the Health Officer discovered that at the time New South Wales averaged about 6.3 persons per house. High rents due to economic conditions gave rise to subletting and overcrowding. In this regard the Chinese, attracted by the gold discoveries, were the chief offenders. In one instance eighty shared a small house while a larger building houses two hundred. Yet, in spite of his zealous efforts, the persistence of many unsavoury features is proof of limited achievement. The reasons were generally beyond the control of the first Health Officer.

Firstly the City Council resented his compulsory appointment. It demanded the right to select its own officers and if left to itself there is no doubt that its unsatisfactory financial state would have led to the dismissal of the Health Officer. Consequently the Council was often reluctant to co-operate. This led the "Herald" to ask the question, was it possible that the Health Officer "had routed out so many nuisances as to become himself a nuisance to those whose indolence and cupidity he exposed?" The dismissal of Dr. Dansey in the "eighties" is further proof of the Council's unco-operative attitude. In justifying the dismissal, the Mayor, Alderman J. Harris, said, "It seems to me that the officer, as the duties are at present regarded, is a sinecure and that a change is absolutely necessary." It appeared to Alderman Riley, a former Mayor that the Health Officer merely accompanied the Mayor on his rounds, "condemning places".

The second limitation was that the City Council did not always possess the power to act upon the Health Officer's recommendations. Here are some good examples. The Council could not compel householders connected with the sewerage to use cisterns although serious pollution of the city water supply was occurring. The closets were directly connected with the mains. If the discharge pipe was blocked sewage remained in the pan and when the supply cock was opened it had free and direct communication with the water pipe. If a main were shut off for repairs or new connections, the withdrawal of water set up a suction drawing the sewage into the water supply. There were instances where solid matter had been discharged from the taps. The water had become "polluted with matter which some high authorities considered too offensive to be admitted even into public sewers."

Where there were no sewerage connections, cess pits were used and the City Council had no powers to regulate their construction or location. Apart from Balmain, there does not appear to have been any municipal sanitary services for the cleansing of cess pits nor any recognised place of deposit for night soil. Often market gardeners purchased the contents of the pits and applied them in a crude state. The carts removing the night soil were allowed to stand in the city as long as they wished and often returned from the gardens laden with vegetables. So long as the night soil was not placed within a certain distance of a highway the Council was powerless to interfere.

In spite of earlier legislation for the control of cattle slaughtering the Council had no control over the most flagrant abuses of public health which occurred at the unhygienic Glebe Island abattoirs. The blood of the slaughtered beasts was allowed to run into the harbour where it mingled with the sewerage of the city system. The abattoirs were not directly supplied with water, and on the exhaustion of the supply carcasses were washed with harbour water.

Although the City of Sydney Improvements Act had attempted to regulate city buildings, the Council was evidently powerless to control buildings unfit for human habitation. In Sussex Street for example, a house visited by the Mayor illustrates the point. "Inside a window an artificial parrot with beaded eyes, wooden bill and gorgeous colours stared at the Mayor. A modern edition of Noah's Ark stood on the mantelpiece. The plaster from the walls had long since disappeared and there were big gaping cracks in them. An old man with clothes that were too big for him stood in a corner, his long shaggy locks hanging over his ears -- voiceless and motionless he stood -- until the Mayor's verdict went forth 'repairs and ventilation'. Then he turned on heel and gave a mocking laugh. Perhaps there was trouble with the landlord."

In Brisbane Ward the visitors "came to a building the greater part of which was below the ground. A fetid stench greeted them as they filed down the rotten rickety staircase. This was a veritable hotbed of disease and several of the advancing contingent began to feel squeamish. The Mayor kept on, however. The work had to be done, he said and seeing was believing. Two flights of stairs were descended and a landing was effected on an earthen floor. It was dark and dank. A human being crouched in a corner. 'Do you mean to tell me you live down here?' asked the Mayor and his tone was very sharp. 'No sir, we -- we only cook 'ere.' Nevertheless there was evidence that somebody did live and sleep there."

In common with other local councils the City had no power to compel owners of industries to eradicate nuisances of their own creations. Alderson's tannery in Redfern was a good example. "Throughout the length of Magill's ground a brown stream of very offensive water, travelling sluggishly along a bottom covered with a red layer of deposit overlaying a filthy black mud about 18 inches in depth. The smell was most overpowering and the deposit when closely examined, especially the portion on top was found to consist of a mixture of animal refuse, hair, putrid flesh and skin, and human and animal excrement. Outside the fence a stagnant pool of similar material was even more offensive, bubbles of gas escaping all over the surface."

If the local councils were so concerned with the limited nature of their public health services why had they not sought greater powers? The barrier was the difficulty of securing legislative action. Councils during this period had been rebuffed so often in trying to obtain amendments to local acts that they were completely discouraged. The whole situation was summed up by the Mayor of Sydney when he asserted that "we ought to have power to sweep whole blocks away and build small but healthy houses for the working classes to live in but as yet WE HAVEN'T GOT THE POWERS."

Where power did exist to proceed against offenders the Courts did not play their part. Generally, fines were too lenient or the Court found in favour of the defendant, even for the most trivial reasons. Alderson's tannery was a good example. Although described as "a nuisance on a gigantic scale" the case was dismissed after an investigation lasting six days. The Attorney-General emphasised that 913 houses contributed to nuisance and the owners were at fault for having erected them near the tannery which originally occupied an isolated position.

Most of the foregoing has concerned the City of Sydney. Let us now return to the general municipal scene. On the eve of the introduction of the first municipalities in 1858 the "Herald" printed a leader containing a grave warning on public health. "Our fellow citizens will learn - that death is rapidly gaining on the population and that our statistics show a worse result than those of the least favoured English cities." Figures were quoted to support the warning. In English cities the death rate was given at 26 per 1,000 compared with Sydney's 33.3 per 1,000 for the last quarter. Of the deaths 51% were children under five years, compared with 26.7% 25 to 65 and only 3.8% over 65. The "Herald" concluded by deploring "the continual sacrifice of children's lives". "The fact then stares us in the face -- children who might have elevated the world by their intellect, served it by their labour and purified it by their virtue, have dropped off in hundreds into the untimely grave. They perished either by the negligence of the parent, or the apathy of society at large. They were stifled by impure air, they were beset everywhere with the malaria of dykes and cesspools; they were drenched with drugs to abate the irritability of disease, and thus they had scarcely tasted the banquet of life before they were poisoned." Such evils are tolerated in society because no person feels responsible."

How responsible were the first municipalities? Here again power was lacking. While the early municipalities were empowered to make by-laws for the preservation of public health, municipal extension was very slow. Even after almost fifty years of local government less than one per cent of New South Wales was under municipal control. Commenting upon the tardy appearance of councils in the metropolitan area, "Bell's Life in Sydney" writes that "the population of the Sydney Hamlets have been by far the most violent in resisting the encroachment -- of municipal rights though they have less grounds for doing so than any others. They wish to retain their time-honoured quagmires and sand drifts; they rather prefer a prevalence of scarlet fever and typhus and that a stagnant pool of putrifying liquid in front of a house by a slight stretch of imagination can be converted into an ornamental sheet of water."

Nothing appears to have been accomplished by these early Councils in the administration of public health control. There were important reasons, largely beyond the scope of this article, but in 1867 an attempt was made to introduce the principle of the health officer to the ordinary municipality. The move was defeated largely on the grounds of return in proportion to cost. Nevertheless, municipalities were empowered to appoint Inspectors of Nuisances. Such officers were generally appointed in metropolitan municipalities and at first were part-time or additional duties given to policemen. Randwick, the first municipality, appointed its first Inspector in 1868 at a salary of £10 per annum. Later, as the municipality grew in size and importance, a local policeman was appointed as his assistant. Like the City the main weaknesses in the municipal campaign to extirpate nuisances were permitted to continue. It was further emphasised that legal provision was inadequate, municipalities lacked the necessary finance, inspectors were not qualified for their tasks and aldermen were motivated by business considerations. Finally, as the "Herald" argued, there was an "absolute necessity for the appointment of a superior authority, having a knowledge of sanitary science armed with sufficient powers to deal promptly with all nuisances and placed in a position of independence so that their judgments will not be likely to be warped by local considerations."

The movement for an authority of the type suggested by the "Herald" culminated in the passage of the Public Health Act in 1896. That such an authority as the present Board of Health was constituted was not the result of systematic pressure, but rather through accidental causes. Before 1896 there had been two Health Boards. The first was the Board of Health and Sewage, constituted in 1875 to investigate the problem of the city sewerage disposal. At the time the sewers discharged into the harbour and it became necessary to find another outfall. Having accomplished its initial task the Board took upon itself a comprehensive survey of public health conditions in general. Voluminous reports were issued and startling revelations made. Numerous cases were quoted to support the view that public health regulation was a matter of urgency. In spite of the importance of its discoveries and recommendations the activities of the Board aroused some antagonism, John McElhone, the member for Upper Hunter in the State legislature, for instance, requested a list of fees paid to the

fifteen members. He considered that such a list would be useful to show "how public money was being squandered." The Board was accused of extending its investigations to earn extra fees. Figures supplied to the Press show that in all the total cost of the investigations was £6331 of which £3895 was paid in fees. As the Board was considered too costly it was abolished in 1876. Its investigations were not without some result. Apart from the reorganisation of the sewerage system, new public health legislation was added to the statute book. The Water Pollution Act enforced the installation of a cistern but did not prevent the contamination of the water supply at its source. The Nuisances Prevention Act gave councils power to control cess pits and led to the introduction of council sanitary services.

The second Board originated from purely accidental causes. In 1881, an outbreak of small pox caused considerable consternation and was responsible for the passage of the Infectious Diseases Act. This measure set up a Board of Health to check the spread of the disease. Like the predecessor this Board also accomplished its initial task and began to interest itself in public health generally. It interested itself in quarantine, the supervision of dairies, the inspection of stock for slaughter, noxious trades, infectious diseases and the administration of related legislation such as the Leprosy Act. Actually this Board too had assumed functions for which it had no power. Fortunately the valuable work of the Board was recognised. Accordingly, in 1896, the first Public Health Act was passed. The new Act reconstituted the Board and provided for the state-wide administration of public health services. Provision was made for the appointment of two executive officers. The principle of the Health Officer was extended to the State, which was divided into health districts. The local Inspector of Nuisances became the Sanitary Inspector and the local council became one of the agencies through which the Board of Health's policy was administered. The "Herald's" desire for a superior authority was now fulfilled. Since 1896, New South Wales municipal health services have become expertly organised under the guidance of the Board. In 1919 the Sanitary Inspector became the Health Inspector, and his appointment today is dependent upon a certificate of competency, gained only after a period of thorough training.
