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ROCKDALE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL



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ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

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24 Duff Street,
ARNCLIFFE. 2205.
MAY 1980.

Dear Friend and Member,

The regular meeting will be held as follows:

Date: Friday Evening, May 16th, 1980, at 8 p.m.

Place: Council Chamber, Town Hall, Princes Highway, Rockdale.

Business: General.

Syllabus Item: Alderman Ron Rathbone has offered to share with us, per medium of his slides, his very recent trip to South America. If you wish to have your favourite seat, then I would suggest that you come early. You are going to enjoy this evening.

Upper Roster: Mrs. Jones, Captain, & Misses Turner, Wood, Murphy & McDougall.

Mr. A. Ellis,
President.
Phone 587.1159.

Mrs. E. Eardley,
Secretary &
Bulletin Editor.
Phone 59.8078.

Mrs. B. Perkins,
Publicity Officer.
Phone 587.9164.

Mrs. E. Wright,
Treas. & Soc. Sec.
Phone 599.4884.

Mr. A. Ellis,
Research Officer.
Phone 587.1159.

"All ears hear very well when promises are being made."

... Surinam Proverb.

34/196/2

(2)

Many of our Members have been and still are ill. We are sorry to hear this and hope you will be well again soon.

SPECIAL NOTICE. The St. George Historical Society is pleased to announce that the following books, written and illustrated by the late Gifford H. Eardley, for the Society, have been re-printed and are now available. No.8 Book was compiled by Mrs. Bronwyn Perkins.

- No.1. "The Wolli Creek Valley"
- No.2. "Kogarah to Sans Souci Tramway"
- No.3. "Saywells Tramway. Rockdale to Lady Robinson's Beach"
- No.4. "Arncliffe to Bexley Tramway"
- No.5. "Our Heritage in Stone"
- No.6. "All Stations to Como"
- No.7. "Tempe and the Black Creek Valley" is also available. (Limited stocks only).
- No.8. "Early Churches of the St. George District".

All books now available at \$1.00 per copy - plus current rate of postage.

For your copy of the above books, please contact one of the following:

Mrs. E. Wright - Ph. 599.4884. Miss B. Otton - Ph. 59.4259 (after 8 p.m.)

Mrs. E. Eardley - Secretary - Ph. 59.8078. Mr. A. Ellis - Ph. 587.1159.

Society Badges available from Mrs. Wright, Treasurer, at \$1.00 each.

SOCIAL.

Date: 24/5/80. A visit to "Yester Grange" at Wentworth Falls.
(a very lovely old home)

Meeting Place: Western side of Rockdale Station.

Time: 8.30 a.m. Sharp.

Cost: \$4.00 per person, plus) \$5.00 Total.
\$1.00 Inspection of Home)

Picnic Lunch, or lunch will be available at the Club at a cost of \$2.20 each.
(Please contact Mrs. Wright if you wish to avail yourself of this facility.)

Notice: Bookings must be finalised not later than May 16th.

- Berry-Camellia Show & Market Day -

Date: 9/8/80.

Meeting Place: Western side of Rockdale Station.

Time: 8.30 a.m. sharp.

Cost: \$4.50 per person
..... Further details later.

Coach Trip to Wagga Wagga & Districts.

October 4, 5 & 6, 1980. (Long Weekend).

See Mrs. Wright for bookings & further details.

LYDHAM HALL LOCAL COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE YEAR
ENDED 29TH FEBRUARY, 1980.

Once again it is my pleasure to report to Council and the St. George Historical Society another year of intense activity and sustained public interest at Lydham Hall.

During the year 2,030 people visited the home, a decrease on the previous year but one caused almost entirely by a succession of petrol strikes which resulted in the cancellation of a number of group visits. Visitors from interstate and overseas were particularly extravagant in their praise of the home. Perhaps the most important visitor of the year was the internationally acclaimed Australian authoress, Christina Stead, who spent her childhood at Lydham Hall and whose book "The Man Who Loved Children" is centred on the house. Her visit in August was her first since she moved to Watson's Bay in 1913.

Further development and restoration of the property has been maintained at a high level. The former upstairs storeroom has been completely renovated and is now open as an exhibition room displaying our extensive collection of clothing. Plans have been prepared for landscaping the rear garden and provision has been allowed by Council to refloor the verandah and reslate the roof. Arrangements have also been made to renovate the larger of the two upstairs display rooms. This will complete the total restoration of the inside of the building.

Another matter of importance has been the considerable amount of new information which has come to light about the building during the year as a result of research into the development of the suburb of Bexley which I undertook in connection with the writing of a book on the subject. Lydham Hall stands on portion of the original Bexley land grant. It has always been assumed that information on the building supplied by the previous owners had been correctly researched. This is not the case. Lydham Hall could not possibly have been built in 1855 as an elaborate plaque on the front of the building proclaims as Joseph Davis did not buy the land until November 1859. It was not built (as previously claimed) by a Dutch stonemason named James Benson but by a Swedish stonemason named Sven Bengtson and his son Solomon Peter Benson whose granddaughter is still living at Casula. Action is in hand to correct these facts.

The year under review has also seen a veritable flood of additional artefacts and objects of interest come to Lydham Hall, together with the purchase of a new hall table, the disposal of two surplus chests of drawers and the gift of an attractive period china cabinet by the National Trust.

As a further attraction, souvenir teaspoons of the house are now available and these have proved most popular.

Whilst much has been achieved, two problems remain. One is to see that the property is continually and effectively promoted and the second is to ensure that a constant stream of people is available to assist Miss Otton in conducting visitors through the home. Lydham Hall has brought great credit to both the Rockdale Council and the St. George Historical Society. The Council has more than played its part in the restoration and promotion of the building but the flow of people prepared to assist in showing visitors through the building has often been very thin indeed.

To those people who have helped, the Local Committee would like to express its deep appreciation for Lydham Hall simply could not function without them.

The Committee would also like to place on record its unreserved praise for the Curator, Miss Otton, for the way in which she conducts the home, her complete dedication to her job and the immaculate way in which the home is always kept. She is a unique lady in a unique position and we are most fortunate to have her services.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the willing co-operation of Mr. Kevin Casey of Council's Staff, and the technical expertise of Council's senior carpenter, Mr. Lloyd Deller, who has done so many jobs for us with such expert results and with a sense of complete dedication and commitment.

Alderman R.W. Rathbone.
Hon. Secretary,
Lydham Hall Local Committee.
24th March, 1980.

THE ABORIGINES' CANOES OF PORT JACKSON.

- Vaughan Evans.
Presented to the St. George
Historical Society
17th August 1979.

"Some of us", said Lionel Hale, "are born like Robinson Crusoe, who could build a hut, and plant a garden, and breed goats, using five rusty nails, a handful of wet corn, and a piece of string ... and some of us," he added, "are not".

It is perhaps not entirely to our advantage that we live in a world which compliments itself upon the advanced state of its technology; we enjoy whatever advantages that such advanced technology can bring but, admittedly, we enjoy whatever advantages that such advanced technology can bring but, admittedly, we also suffer from some disadvantages that follow in its train.

How would we fare if we were stranded in a wilderness, however benign, with nothing but our own mother wit, our own resources, to help us survive, let alone flourish? How would we cross a river too wide to swim, for example?

Before we consider the matter of the aborigines' canoes of Port Jackson, let us therefore look at the solutions found by other primitive (and not-so-primitive) peoples for getting across the water.

One may well imagine that, very early in the history of man, he had seen how a broken branch would support animals or even himself, if he was caught in a flash flood: from that observation it would be a short step to using a log to cross a stream. Primitive man would often have seen the swollen carcasses of dead animals floating down on a flood, and have realised that such a carcass would support his weight. The inconvenience of having to wait to cross a river until there should happen to be a flash flood, carrying a suitably - but not over-inflated, animal carcass within reach, would surely have been apparent even to the most primitive man. So, presumably, was the skin float born: an animal skin sewn up carefully, and inflated for use whenever required. These skins usually look quite obscene, but they do their job very well.

Then came skin boats, a wicker-work or basket-like frame covered in skins, such as the Eskimo kayak, used singly or to carry many people. Then the coracles that were in use in England and Ireland, for example, even in this century, (although with canvas rather than hides or skins). Pacific islanders have used kelp bladders held in a wicker-work frame. How about reeds - bundles of reeds lashed together in a roughly boat-shaped fashion, as in the "balsa" of Lake Titicaca, and in the reed boats of Egypt and Africa generally.

The pinnacle of development in primitive vessels is seen in the many forms of wooden canoe, ranging from the most crude form of dugout to the meticulously fashioned Maori war canoe. Such canoes were developed in many parts of the world by fixing plank wash-strakes along the top of the log each side, until we come to varieties where the dug-out log is hardly more than the keel. This development is, surely, the start of proper planked boat building techniques that have lasted right up to this day of fibre glass moulded hulls.

The more primitive bark canoes, such as those used by the Australian aborigines are not unique to these people: wherever there were people at a comparable stage of development, in comparable circumstances, you can expect comparable solutions to common problems, and this is indeed the case with bark canoes.

We can see why some of the other types of primitive craft were not developed by our aborigines:

Logs - need axes far more efficient than their crude ones of stone.
Reeds - yes, but only on the Murray River and in parts of Tasmania.
Skins - no really large native animals for floats or coracles.

The Tasmanian aborigines used one of the most primitive of all forms of canoe, in fact, it was hardly more than a float. James Backhouse, a Quaker missionary, wrote in his "Narrative of a visit to the Australian colonies" - *"Parties of aborigines resort hither at certain seasons. They cross the mouth of the harbour on floats, in the form of a boat, made of bundles of the paper-like bark of the Swamp Tea-tree, lashed side by side, by means of tough grass. On these, three or four people are placed, and one swims on each side, holding it with one hand."* It would seem that these particular Tasmanian aborigines had not even advanced to the most primitive form of paddle, even in the twilight of their history.

Moving towards Sydney, we find that canoes on the mainland were made of a single sheet of bark gathered up and tied at each end. Around Moreton Bay, several sheets of bark would be sewn together, with a rough frame-work of saplings. Across the top of the Australian continent, we find single outrigger canoes on the north Queensland coast, and double outriggers - dugouts - in Arnhem Land - the influence of outsiders is at work here, of course - Indonesians and others. In the Gulf of Carpentaria we are back to sewn bark canoes again, as also to the west of Darwin, where there are also some simple dugouts. At Port Hedland we find rafts made of four or five mangrove poles. Down the west coast of Australia, there are no canoes or rafts, or any other aboriginal waterborne craft as all, nothing at all along the south coast, across the Bight, nor until we come to the Murray River.

Why were there no canoes or rafts on the west and south coasts of the continent? Basically, because of the lee shore, the rough and perilous seas and the lack of any rivers worthy of the name.

Back to Port Jackson. From the very first, European visitors to Botany Bay and Port Jackson, formed a very poor opinion of the local

aboriginal canoes. Captain James Cook, in his journal entry dated April 29, 1770 at Botany Bay, wrote: *"Three canoes lay upon the beach, the worst I think I ever saw. They were about 12 or 14 feet long made of one piece of the bark of a tree drawn or tied up at each end and the middle kept open by means of pieces of sticks by way of thwarts."*

Poor though they were, such canoes were part of the background into which the colony was grafted, and deserve attention in any account of the waterborne activities of those early days of settlement. That they were quite so primitive a type of craft, must have dashed the wild dreams of any of the convicts who may have had plans of making their escape by sea with the assistance of the natives.

In most accounts of the First Fleet, mention is made of bark canoes. Captain Watkin Tench of the Marines wrote in his "Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay" and in his "Complete Account of the Settlement of Port Jackson", and also Lt. William Bradley of HMS Sirius wrote in his "Voyage to New South Wales". The aborigines of Port Jackson had a great need for craft of some kind, for fish appeared to form a large part of their subsistence. Tench and his fellow officers observed that *"nothing short of the most painful labour, and unwearied assiduity"* could procure enough for them to eat. Although Tench thought the canoes despicable, he greatly admired the dexterous way in which they were handled, and remarked upon the swiftness with which they could be paddled and the boldness of the natives in venturing on the open sea in these frail craft. The canoe itself was made from a sheet of the bark of one of the many varieities of eucalypt that grew in the Port Jackson district, but by preference the stringybark. Spring-time was the best season for making canoes, as the bark was easier to remove when the sap was rising, and was more supple then, than at other seasons. Having chosen a suitable tree, the canoe-maker, would cut around the trunk at a short height from the ground, and again as far up as he required for the size of the canoe to be built. He would then make vertical cuts between the two to give a piece of suitable width. He never cut the bark away all round the tree trunk, but only for about 1/3 of the circumference at the most. For even the smallest canoe, the uppermost cut would be considerably beyond the reach of any man. The solution was to notch the tree to provide hand and toe holds, or to cut down a sapling and lean it at an angle to the canoe-tree, by which means the axe-man could readily climb to the required height. Since the largest canoes were nearly twenty feet long, and the smallest about eight feet long, you can see how necessary this was. The hatchet used was of a type of hard stone similar to flint, sharpened at the edge by knapping. It was secured to a stick about two feet long by gum and lashings of twine. The next stage in making the canoe was to lever off the bark with a stick, or a stone wedge, using a billet of wood as a mallet... a most difficult, slippery business. Some communities left the bark attached to the trunk by a narrow strip for a short time, to allow it to partially dry out without undue warping before it was finally separated and carefully lowered to the ground and heated over a gentle fire. The ends were then gathered up and lashed with cord or vines, while thin pieces of wood were wedged to keep the sides apart. The fully shaped canoe was dried over a carefully tended fire for up to a week to lighten it and to fix the shape before launching.

Fitting out was simplicity itself. According to Lt. Bradley, the paddles were like pudding stirrers, about 2 or 3 feet long, and were held, one in each hand. They were normally used alternately, one hand coming forward as the other came aft, the paddler sitting perfectly upright and maintaining the very delicate balance needed to prevent oversetting the canoe as to the manner born. In addition to the paddles, there would usually be a stone with a fishing line available to be attached to it to act as a "killick" or anchor. A crude bailer of stone or rock would complete the fitting out.

In the middle of the canoe it was normal to keep a small fire burning, on a piece of clay or thin rock. This was as much for convenience of having it ready to hand when the aborigines landed at night, as for warmth in the canoe, or for broiling fish on board. Fire-making was a tedious and difficult process. Bradley recorded that the native boy Nanbarry was unable to get it. Tench gave this description: *"They take a reed, and shave one side of the surface flat. In this they make a small incision to reach the pith and, introducing into it a stick purposely blunted at the end, they turn it round between the hands.. as quickly as possible until flame be produced. As this operation is not only laborious, but the effect tedious, they frequently relieve each other at the exercise. And, to avoid being often reduced to the necessity of putting it into practice, they always, if possible, carry a lighted stick with them, whether in their canoes or moving from place to place on land."*

The bottom of the canoe was generally lined with pieces of bark, fern and seaweed, on which the aborigines would sit, always facing forward. When a man and woman were in the same canoe the woman would always sit forward and the man abaft. This was a most uncomfortable situation for the woman, for it meant that she had her back to the fire, as a result of which it was recorded that many women had backs as badly scarred as if they had been lashed with the cat o'nine tails. The woman invariably sat with her knees up to her chin and her feet crossed before her. If a young child was carried, it might be laid across the mother's lap or seated between her knees, or it might sit on the man's shoulders holding fast by his head. In any event, a child would be carried in such a way that neither man nor woman would be prevented from using both paddles.

The canoe often took in a great deal of water. This water had to be scooped out by means of the flat stone or shell, carried as a bailer. This bailer was held in the hollow of the hand, and the water thrown out behind the paddler. This form of bailing was very hard on the canoe, since the edge of the stone or shell scraped along the bark at each stroke and gradually wore it away until a hole was started. Holes could be patched initially with gum and sometimes with the leaf of the cabbage-tree palm, but inevitably it became too large to be repaired. With any luck a canoe might last for two years.

An aboriginal could get in and out of his canoe with great ease, although it was only with the greatest difficulty care and good luck, that a European could manage to do so without oversetting it. When he landed at a beach or on a mud flat he would either haul the canoe ashore after him, or would heave a stone overboard with a fishing line fast to it as soon as the canoe took the ground. He would then step one leg out, keeping

the weight of his body in the centre of the canoe until he had a good enough foothold to enable him to shift his weight out in safety. In fact, the aboriginal's balance was almost perfect, and even in a heavy surf his canoe would usually ship no more water than it would in sheltered areas.

I came across an interesting account of aboriginal fishing with the spear in James Backhouse's narrative of his visit to the Australian colonies in 1833-1838. He wrote as follows: "*We walked to Cook's River, which empties itself into Botany Bay, and fell in with a party of Blacks, who were fishing. One of them had a canoe, made of a large sheet of bark, stretched open with sticks, and drawn together in folds at the ends. This process they effect, by first warming the bark in the fire. The man and his wife were seated on their knees in the canoe, in which they had a fire, on a flat stone. The man propelled the canoe by means of a paddle, that he applied first on one side and then on the other. He used a spear in fishing, made of a long stick, with four, long, wooden prongs attached to it, by means of string and Grass-tree gum. This he brought slowly, almost into contact with the fish, before striking. While fishing, he kept up a noise like the blowing of a Porpoise, and accompanied it by showers of saliva, that disturbed the surface of the water, like small rain. He seldom failed in transfixing his finny prey. Another man, who stood on a log that extended into the river, was equally successful, by a similar process.*" Only the men would use the spear. The women fished with hook and line, sitting in the canoe. Their lines were made from the inside bark of the cabbage-tree or the black kurrajong and other similar shrubs. The fish hooks were chopped out of a particular type of sea shell resembling a pearl oyster shell, using a stone as a hammer and the sole of the foot as an anvil. The hooks were afterwards rubbed on a piece of rock until they were quite smooth. They were very much curved, and without barbs. They were finished remarkably quickly according to Tench's account, but he considered them to be of excellent workmanship, nevertheless. Sometimes the claw of a bird was used as a fish hook. You can see samples of spears, hooks and lines at the Australian Museum.....

In the early accounts of the settlement at the Cove there are many references to the number of canoes seen on the waters of the harbour. Bradley recorded that on August 17, 1788, Governor Phillip and Captain Hunter went down the harbour in two boats, and the Lieutenant and master of the Sirius up the harbour in two more, not only to examine all the coves but also to estimate the number of canoes and natives about the harbour. They met with a total of 67 canoes, 94 men, 34 women and 9 children. All of the natives that they met with in the upper part of the harbour were very friendly, one party even taking shell-fish off their fire as a gift to their strange visitors. However, those met with in the North Arm, now known as Middle Harbour, were not so friendly. A few days later the Governor came across a large number of natives with 50 canoes in Middle Harbour alone.

It was noticed that, when employed in fishing, the canoes rarely carried more than 2 adults, but that when the aborigines were moving

from one part of the harbour to another they might hold 4 and occasionally as many as 6 people. An unoccupied canoe was sometimes seen in tow of another canoe manned by two paddlers. They were never seen with any form of outrigger or sail. However, it was remarked upon that they ventured outside the Heads and were occasionally encountered between Port Jackson and Broken Bay, even when there was a heavy swell.

In conclusion I should like to quote from the book "Southern Lights and Shadows" by Frank Fowler, originally published in 1859 and reprinted in facsimile only recently. This quotation gives a glimpse of what Port Jackson was like before our so-called civilisation gradually spread out all round its shores, and much as it must have been in the days when aboriginal canoes were the only craft to ruffle the surface of its waters.

"Of the harbour of Port Jackson it is difficult to speak within the bounds of calm description. I have talked with travelled men ... who have weathered at Rio, ... yachted at Naples - and they all agree in this, that, for scenery, capacity and safety, the haven of Sydney is the finest in the world. It is a harbour sui generis.... Wherever you walk in Sydney, blue glimpses of the harbour are marked in the distance. In one direction you see it sheening away for miles, until it loses itself in the dim greenery of the far-off bush; in another you catch a mere shield of it set out bravely against the sun. Here it dwindles to the dimensions of a pillar of marble prone upon the hill-side; there it opens into a perfect sea, with a fleet of tapering masts cut clear against the sky. From almost any balcony in any part of the city, the eye, gazing through the torrid atmosphere, is cooled by the grateful breezes blowing off the water. For miles out of the town, you mark the tortuous windings of the stream. One arm of it reaches up to Parramatta, a distance of about 15 miles..... Its banks, from Sydney to Parramatta are crowded with orange trees, which shoot a keen delicious perfume across the water, and through the foliage of which the golden fruit gleams out, like lamps of palest gold....."

Charming villas rise from every agreeable point along the banks, while here and there is a village of neat stone houses (with little garden and orangery to each, and sometimes a landing-place of rough water-whitened stones, running out into the stream), centred and consecrated by a toy-like church, with tiny spire, bright with copper, pointing through the air. Here too, is a fine convent, with a wealth of tinkling bells, and a magnificent erie-like property, set high on a jut of rock and surrounded by a perfect forest of white-limbed eucalypti...

Rising from different parts of Port Jackson are verdant islets, singularly beautiful, and which look like bits of faerie-land - fragments of a dream-slumbrous homes for the companions of Ulysses or Mr Tennyson's later "Lotus-Eaters." They are edged with pendulous bushes and tropical water-plants - which cool their brazen leaves and thirsty tendrils in the tide - and smothered all over with a sward of matted bush-flowers, veined with the basanite stalk of the trailing melon."

We still have a beautiful harbour although, perhaps we should admit that it resembles the "curate's egg" of the old "Punch" cartoon, in that it is now only "good in parts". In recent years there has been a gradual

34/196/8

improvement in the waters of the harbour, and certain areas have been cleared of industrial garbage and regenerated - perhaps not back to nature, but at least made into clean, green and growing open spaces. We cannot go backwards, and should not wish to do so, for the old days were cruel and harsh in many ways. However, I think it is good to be reminded of what it was like in the days of this country's pioneers. It may perhaps help us to ensure that our heritage of history is kept constantly in mind and give more meaning and understanding to our own lives.

It is well over one hundred years since aboriginal canoes were seen on Port Jackson, and it must be almost that long since the last bark canoe was used anywhere in Australia. I was amused to hear only recently of an attempt some years ago by the Public Relations men at Garden Island Dockyard, to build a replica of a bark canoe.

Many attempts were made, but none were successful. There was just no way they could make the canoe and keep its balance. Finally, after much effort, a passable replica was made of fibre glass. Two aborigines were even hired and brought to Sydney to navigate the canoe - but the balance could not be maintained. Finally, after a cost in excess of \$1,000.00, the project was abandoned.

If the might of the Royal Australian Navy, in both brain and brawn could not make a simple bark canoe - was the old aboriginal and his bark canoe as despicable as all that?
