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ROCKDALE

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ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

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24 Duff Street,
Arncliffe. 2205.

October 1980.

Dear Friend and Member,

The regular meeting will be held as follows:-

Date: Friday evening, October 17th, 1980, at 8.00 p.m.
Place: Council Chamber, Town Hall, Princes Highway, Rockdale.
Business: General.
Syllabus Item: Mr. David Earle, Vice President of North Sydney Historical Society, Architect on City Council, & also responsible for the Restoration of the Queen Victoria Buildings, will give an Illustrated Talk: "History & Conservation of the Queen Victoria Markets Building". This subject should be of great interest to all of us.

Supper Roster: Mrs. Rootes, Captain, and Mesdames Samuelson, Longhurst and McLeod.

Ladies please bring a plate.

Mr. R. Lee,
President.
Phone 570.1244

Mrs. E. Wright,
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"Discontent is simply a penalty for being ungrateful for what we have."

(Friendship Book 1976).

CONGRATULATIONS.

The President and Members would like to congratulate our Patron, Alderman R.W. Rathbone, on being elected Mayor of the Municipality of Rockdale for 1980/81. We wish him well in his new Office.

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. Mrs. A. Ellis - Ph. 587.1159.

Also available from the Secretary (59.8078) - "The Bundeena Book", illustrated. Price \$4.00 plus postage. Compiled by Mr. Les. Philpott, Published by the Bundeena Book Committee.

Book 9 in our series of books on history, local and thereabouts, is in the process of being researched. Can you help with any information concerning the early Pioneers of the District? If you can, this will be greatly appreciated.

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

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BEXLEY - AS I KNEW IT - from 1895 - 1917.

- Grace (Middenway) Nicholls
Faulconbridge N.S.W. 1963.

I have been asked by Mr Philip Geeves, Historian for the St. George District, Sydney, N.S.W., to write some of my early memories of Bexley; also to give a brief outline of the life and work of my father, John Saunders Middenway. I remember so much that it is difficult to know what to record and what to leave unwritten.

We went to Bexley towards the end of 1895, when I was nine years old. We had been living in Wagga, where my Father had been Headmaster of Gurwood Street School.

** ** *

Father was born in Sydney, when his parents were living in a house near the Observatory, somewhere in the vicinity of Fort Street School, on April 24th, 1855. Later his parents moved to Woolloomooloo Bay. Part of the backyard of their home was a sandy beach, washed by the waters of the bay. That was before the reclamation was carried out, and the bay was filled in as far inshore as the old Fish Markets. His father, of Dutch descent (Gerritt Hendrick Middenway), was an engineer at "The Sydney Morning Herald" office. He died as the result of an accident while working there. His mother was an Englishwoman, whose first husband was Captain Spicer, an English Military Officer on duty in New Zealand during the Maori uprising in March 1845.

My grandmother was the first white woman living at Russell, in the Bay of Islands, in the north of New Zealand. I did not know either my grandmother or grandfather as they had died some years before I was born. After her first husband died, Grandmother came to Sydney where she married Grandfather. She had two children by the first marriage, and three sons by the second. Father was the youngest.

Father was educated to the age of 14 years, at Fort Street School, Sydney, as also was my mother, Sarah Elizabeth Venteman, also of Dutch descent on her father's side. Father left Fort Street, and became a pupil teacher at Paddington School. He received instruction before and after school hours from the headmaster, and taught a class of boys during the day, many of them being older than he. He later became an Assistant at Paddington School. When he was about 20 years old, he was appointed Master of Clarence Town School. While there he and Mother were married. (Their parents had been friends before either of them was born.) They had 3 sons: Frank, Arthur & Gerritt Hendrick (Dick).

Father was teaching at Clarence Town for five and a half years. He was then transferred to Greta, at that time a very small coal mining town. He was there for 11 1/2 years. My sister Ada Oliver, and I

were born in Greta. From Greta we went to Wagga Wagga. My youngest brother, John Reginald (known as "Reg" as a child, and "Jack" as he grew older) was born while we were living in Wagga.

After being at Gurwood Street school for three years, an exchange was arranged with Mr Hume, Headmaster at Bexley. Mr Hume did not have good health, and as Bexley was not far from the coast, he wished to move to a drier and warmer climate. Father was only too pleased to make the change as his children were growing up; the eldest, Frank, was then in charge of North Wagga School. He was 19, and the next 3 children were aged from 18 to 14 years. He realised it was a good opportunity to give them the advantage of living near a city.

After the town of Wagga, with a main street nearly 2 miles long, and which even then in 1895, had 46 hotels, Bexley was quite a small village in comparison. The school, two or three small shops, two churches and a tiny Post Office, with a number of scattered houses, comprised Bexley. (On thinking back, I believe the Church of England was the only Church and that the Presbyterian Church was built later.) One side of Harrow Road was fairly well built on, but the district near the school was not nearly so closely settled. The Post Office was a tiny, whitewashed building of the very early type seen in the country many years ago, with a low corrugated iron roof, and built almost flat on the ground. It was in Forest Road, on the western side, in about the same position as the Community Centre occupies, near the top of Harrow Road. I believe it was attended by a Mrs Pearse. There were quite a number of people of that name living in Bexley then. Several of that name came to school. I remember a Charlie Pearse being in my class.

There was a larger cottage of the same type as the Post Office on part of the ground where Bexley school now stands. Granny Parkes (she was never known by any other name) lived there with her daughter and son-in-law, Mr & Mrs Luck, & their family. Granny Parkes appeared to grandmother or close relative of nearly all the school children. I think she must have belonged to one of the earliest families to settle in Bexley. I would think by the style and age of the cottage that it was her original home. Mr Luck was a wood & coal merchant. They lived opposite the school residence, or "school house" as we called it, where we lived. It faced Forest Road, & the ground went to the corner of Bay View Street. The house has been demolished for some years.

Mr Luck's house was similar to the Post Office, only larger; very low roofed, whitewashed, & almost flush with the ground. It had a 3 roomed frontage. The 3rd room had no connecting door with the rest of the house, so the person occupying that room had to go out into the open when he wanted to go to bed, which was not too comfortable on a cold night.

One of Mr Luck's sons was a teacher at the school when we arrived. Other teachers were Miss Rose Simpson, Miss Woods & Miss Swan, who

was a member of one of the highly respected, earlier families to settle in Parramatta.

From the verandah of the school house we had a fine view of part of Botany Bay, the high ground on which Long Bay Gaol is built, the district round the northern end of the bay and beyond, near where Bunnerong Power Station now stands. It wasn't long before houses were built at the top end of Frederick Street (near Forest Road) & on the spare ground opposite the old school, blocking out much of our view; but on turning into Frederick Street on my way to the train or to the Congregational Church, Rockdale, which we attended, & where I was for many years Church Organist, I always had immense pleasure from the view of Botany Bay, Bare Island, Cape Banks & Solander ("The Heads"), Kurnell, then in its native state, forming a dark green background to the obelisk which was erected to mark, the first landing on Australian soil. All this could be seen very plainly on a clear day (before the days of factories & smoke to take away the clearness of the atmosphere); the whole picture being highlighted by the blue of the bay & the distant ocean showing between Botany Bay Heads. Eventually that view was also blocked out, as the large expanse of open country in that area was subdivided & streets & houses took the place of open ground.

The first night we spent in Bexley, it was decided that we would sleep at my Aunt's home in Judd Street, Rockdale Park (or at least some of us would) as our furniture having come by train, was still partially unpacked. (I remember my job was to unwind yards & yards of strips of rag which had been wrapped round the legs of our dining room suite; how different from the easy way of moving furniture now!)

Rockdale Park is now Banksia, the name being changed when Banksia Railway Station was built. (Jannali & Allawah Stations were also built during our time at Bexley.) To go to Rockdale Park we crossed Frederick Street & Herbert Street. It was very dark, no lights anywhere. Soon we found ourselves stumbling over row after row of what we later found out to be grass covered furrows. It had been cultivated ground some time before. We were told later that it had been part of an orchard owned by Mr Lauff or his father. They lived in Lauff Street, a street running off Railway Street, Rockdale, towards the higher land on which Bexley is now built, & on which was the furrowed ground we stumbled across that night. (Lauff Street was about the second or third street from Frederick Street, running parallel with it.) The furrowed land stretched from the foot of the grounds belonging to "Lydham Hall", the large stone house on Lydham Hill, which was near what are now Oswell and Clarence Streets. After crossing the furrowed ground we eventually came to some rocks down which we had to scramble to get to the lower ground of Rockdale Park, not far from what was then Cairncross' dairy.

It is all laid out now with streets & cottage homes. Mr Alec Sutherland was the first builder to buy land & erect cottages for

letting or selling on terms in that area; in fact, I think possibly in Bexley. He was a Deacon of the Congregational Church. Why all the streets in that area were named Herbert, Frederick, Oswell, Clarence, etc., I am at a loss to know. I don't know if these boys' names had any historical significance or not. I never heard anyone speak of it, but I do think a little more originality could have been shown.

The street lighting in 1895 was most primitive and inadequate. The lamps were very few and far between, and many of the footpaths were not made. Frederick Street after rain was anything but pleasant to walk in, especially at night. One could easily be bogged as the ground was composed of clay in parts and would be very slippery and dangerous to walk on. Later the centre was laid with a path of bricks, about 3' wide. The light from the street lamps was practically of no use at all as the lamps were lit by gas. To the time of our leaving Bexley in 1917, there was no electricity. The school building had no lighting whatsoever. If a meeting was held there, it had to take place in the daylight hours, or those attending had to take kerosene lamps, storm lanterns, candles, etc., to light the room in which the meeting was held. Often lanterns were carried to church or meetings which were attended at night as the street lighting was so poor.

When we first went to Bexley we would see the lamplighter carrying his little step ladder over his shoulder every evening as he went on his rounds lighting the lamps.

Later, when incandescent burners were introduced, he used a stick with a hook on the end. There were two chains with rings attached at the end, hanging from the burner. To light the lamp, one of the rings would be pulled down and the burner would light. In the morning he would come round again and pull the other ring and the light would dim, but not go out. It was then ready to light in the evening by repeating the process.

Incandescent lights had a great habit of burning holes in the asbestos mantle if the light was pulled up too quickly, or exposed to a draught. The lamplighter must have spent as much time renewing mantles as lighting lamps.

An area which changed tremendously after we had left Bexley was along Forest Road from the old school to Preddy's Road. There were no streets running off Forest Road from Stoney Creek Road corner to Preddy's Road, and there were only two houses in all that distance. The houses and the land belonging to them occupied the whole of that space.

They were Preddy's home "Besborough" and "Kinsel Grove", the home of the Kinsela family. The Preddy home was fairly large, but "Kinsel Grove" built by Mr Kinsela, founder of the firm of that name, was a large square stately home, standing in park-like grounds with a

tennis court and carriage drive on the rise between Forest and Stoney Creek Roads. In the parklands from the house to the corner of these two roads were animals and birds roaming under the large trees. I am not quite clear as to the kind of animals they were. If my memory is correct, there were kangaroos, emus and deer. It was all very peaceful, and has left a delightful memory; the large shady trees, the tiny creek running through the grounds and the animals grazing; the green grass and tiny stream giving food and drink to the animals. There was also an animal shelter built for bad weather.

On the eastern side of Forest Road, from Dunmore Street to Queen Victoria Street, there were about three large houses, possibly four. One near the top of the hill was occupied by the Macleod family. Mr. Macleod's brother was Dr Macleod of Rocky Point Road, Rockdale (now I think known as "Princes Highway"). The girls came to school with me, - Jessie, Flora and I think there was a third girl.

The Wyndhams lived in a house nearer Dunmore Street; Hilda and Vera were also at school with me.

From the corner of Queen Victoria Street, looking towards Carlton, there was a large open common. Away in the distance could be seen a few houses. I would say those houses which were seen in the distance would be within walking distance of Carlton Railway Station.

Other large houses in Bexley, Arncliffe and Rockdale are worth mentioning, as also are the families who lived in them.

Mr Gibbins lived in a large home on Wollongong Road, about half way between Bexley and Arncliffe. I have been told that he accumulated his money in the pearl fishing industry. Before we left Bexley, the house had been taken over by the Salvation Army as a "Girls' Home". Another residence was purchased about the same time by the Salvation Army, as a "Boys' Home". It stood on the top of the hill between the first and second gullies. Miss Gibbins married Mr David Stead, for many years a leading official in the Government Fisheries Dept. They lived for some time with their family of young children at "Lydham Hall". Christina, a daughter of Mr Stead by a previous marriage (known at school as "Peggie") was a very quiet & almost shy girl when at school. She later wrote a book which was wonderfully received. The reviews were the most outstanding I have ever read. It took the bankers & men of the financial world by storm. It was stated in effect that never before had a woman shown such insight and understanding in matters of finance.

My Clayton, a well known Sydney solicitor, lived with his family at "Myee" near the junction of Wollongong and Forest Roads. Hector later became a solicitor & Harry became a doctor. Both these boys were at school with me. I am told the home is now a Babies' Home or Hospital.

"Esrom" Convalescent Hospital, which is connected with the Rachel

Forster Hospital, Sydney, was once the home of the Cormack family. It was later bought by Mr Tom Morse (one of a large family of that name, who married & settled in the St. George district some years previously). He named the house "Esrom" which is the name "Morse" spelt backwards. They were still living there when we left Bexley.

Mr. W.G.Judd, who had at one time a business interest in the Hurstville Brick Works, was a very much respected & well like member of the community. He was always a most enthusiastic member of any organisation of which he was a member. He was Mayor of Rockdale for some time. He was much interested in the Congregational Church. He lived at "Athelstane" in Wollongong Road, Arncliffe. He owned a large piece of land adjoining his house. This he made available for the use of the church football and cricket clubs. He was very interested in young people, & on occasions he & his wife would entertain a number of them at his week-end cottage in a delightful setting at Howie Bay. My first drive in a motor car was with Mr & Mrs Judd. I'll never forget it. Mr Judd speeded at 34 miles per hour!! It was an open car of course, & compared with the very low cars of today, we appeared to be perched very high in the air.

I would like to tell of 4 clergymen who impressed me very much, and were well known to most people in Bexley in the earlier years.

Rev. Mr Byng. He was Rector of Christ Church in Albyn Street, Bexley. He gave religious instruction to the school children. He was a man of wonderful physique; very tall, well built, upright, with a natural dignity of bearing. He had iron grey hair, which he parted down the centre of the back of his head & brushed forward on each side. He had a very swarthy skin. All this has been attributed to an Indian Princess mother & a distinguished English father. He always wore a huge plain gold cross hanging from his watch chain. It caught the sun as he walked, so that the first thing one noticed was Mr Byng's gold cross, then the man himself, almost always surrounded by a group of children, all trying to hold one of his hands. He was a friend of Father's. They often took Saturday outings together, often joined by Mother.

The Rev. Mr. Waddell came to the district later, but he has his place on this list. He was a retired Methodist Minister. I especially remember him for his genial kindly manner, his cheerful happy face and smile & his love of children. He had a white flowing beard, & this with his whole appearance made him the personification of a perfect Santa Claus.

The Rev. Thomas Hill, was the Bexley Presbyterian Minister. I did not know him well, but admired him for the steadfast way he carried out his duties. He was elderly & also blind, but he did not let these things interfere with his work & duties.

The Rev. James Clark - he had once been Rector of the Church of England at Kogarah, years before we arrived in Bexley. He was reputed to have been an exceptionally clever man, but overstudy is blamed for the brain disturbance from which he suffered for the rest of his life. He had to give up the Ministry.

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ROCKDALE

The trains until after we had left Bexley, were all steam driven. They ran once an hour, to & from Sydney Station, which at that time was situated on the southern side of Devonshire Subway. We lived 3/4 of a mile from Rockdale Station. The only conveyance from the station was a horse drawn wagonette, which occasionally met the trains. As the charge from the station to our home was 2/-, we mostly ended up walking home up the steep Frederick Street Hill.

A tram line was laid from Arncliffe Station, along Wollongong Road, into Forest Road, past the old school, & along Stoney Creek Road. The whole line was 3 miles in length.

The Kinsela Estate was subdivided, the trees & parklands disappeared and rows of houses were built round the old home.

A daily paper article of the time stated that by worldwide statistics, it was found that Sydney was the healthiest city in the world, & medical statistics proved that by average, Bexley had the least deaths of any of Sydney's suburbs. Bexley residents were going about telling people that Bexley was the healthiest spot in the world.

Commencing near Stoney Creek Road, through the back of Bexley, old Arncliffe & nearly to Tempe ran a small gully. The part of the gully we liked most was at the bottom of Bay View Street, about 10 minutes walk from the school. It was the first of 3 gullies running almost parallel with Forest Road on the western side, almost as far as Belmore. The East Hills Railway Line runs along the second gully.

When we went to Bexley, the attendance must have been something over 200, as I remember Father coming home soon after we went there, and telling us there had been a record attendance of 240 people. Quite a number of the children in the earlier days had to walk up to 2 miles each way to and from school.

About this time a large galvanised iron building was erected in Broadford St very near the school. It was used for the "Silent Movie". One half only was roofed, 6d. was charged for the roofed end & 3d. for the unroofed part. The whole building was later floored & covered, & for quite some time it was used to accommodate school pupils. Christ Church Hall was utilised next. Finally a brick two-storey building of 4 rooms was erected in the grounds. Before it was finished, it was found necessary to double it in size. By that time the playground had so many buildings, there was not much room for the children to move about.

When first World War broke out, there were calls for books & reading matter for the troops. The result was astounding. Hundreds of books, magazines & other reading matter came in, & continued to do so until we left Bexley in 1917. Each magazine enclosed a letter from one of the senior pupils, & some very interesting replies were received. Father packed them in cartons which a local carrier took to the receiving depot.

One of the lady teachers organised knitting classes for girls & boys, and these classes were held regularly during school hours. They made socks, scarves, Balaclava caps & other comforts for overseas troops.

It became very difficult for the Education Department to keep up supplies of men teachers to the various schools which were short staffed owing to enlistment, numbers killed and other casualties.

Father through this lack of sufficient teachers was obliged to teach a class of 80 boys, as well as supervising a school with an enrolment of 1200 pupils & a total teaching staff of 22. The school had a few years previously been divided into 3 departments, boys, girls and infants, all at Primary level.

We were then planning for Father's retirement. The strain was telling on him. He had been teaching for 48 years, and for more than 30 of them had suffered attacks of Angina Pectoris. I do not think he would have retired during the war if he had been in good health.

Father retired at the end of 1917. He held a 1A Classification and he had built the school to a 1st class Classification. He had been teaching at Bexley School nearly 22 1/2 years. He was nearly 63 when he retired, and his salary on retiring was under 6 pounds per week. Better conditions and pay came in a few years after Father's retirement.

I will finish this paper by telling of Father's main interests, apart from teaching.

Music, the study of Native Flora of N.S.W. and photography. These things he was keenly interested in and gave much time to, often using them in his school work.

In each of the country towns where he taught, he conducted a Church Choir, and inaugurated a Band of Hope for the children.
