

ROCKDALE

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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.
March 1981.

Dear Friend and Member,

The March meeting will be held as follows:-

Date: Friday Evening, March 27th, 1981, at 8.00 p.m. (note altered date).

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

Syllabus Item: Alderman Ron Rathbone will be our Guest Speaker, and will show slides from his collection of "Historic Homes of the District", in conjunction with 'Heritage Week'.

Business: General.

Supper Roster: Mrs. Robb, Captain, and Mesdames Iarnach, Meyers,
and Ronson.

Ladies please bring a plate.

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President.
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Phone 587.1159

"Excuses are worthless. Your enemies won't accept them,
and your friends don't need them." Friendship Book - 1970.

(2)

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

We regret the deaths of Mrs. Gladys Gash of Arncliffe, and Mr. Arthur Ford of Darling Point (late of Carlton), both long standing and valued members. To their families we offer our deepest sympathy.

20th Anniversary Dinner - Ainslee Lodge, Bexley, Saturday, 18th July, 1981.

Saturday 3rd, Sunday 4th and Monday 5th October, 1981 - Weekend historical tour of Dubbo and Districts. \$92.00. Deposit \$10.00 at March meeting.
Please see Mrs. Wright for details.

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 reprinted 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 \$1.25 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.

Book No.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.

NOTE: APRIL MEETING - 24.4.81. (Date changed due to Easter).

REMINDER:

Coach Tour of "Historic Homes and Buildings, and Points of Interest".

Date: Wednesday, 25th March, 1981.

Meeting Place: Railway St., Rockdale (Opposite Railway Station)

Time: 2.00 p.m. sharp. return 5.00 p.m.

Cost: \$2.00 per person.

(Mr. Arthur Ellis will be guide on this occasion.)

34/207/3

PERSISTENCE REWARDED.

- K.A. Johnson - Councillor
Royal Australian Historical Society
Newsletter - No.1. New Series -
January 1981.

*The 80th Anniversary of the founding of the (Royal)
Australian Historical Society in Sydney in 1901.*

The year 1981 marks the 80th Anniversary of the founding in Sydney of the Australian Historical Society. It also marks the 80th Anniversary of Federation of the Australian States into the Commonwealth of Australia and the 75th Anniversary of the commencement of the Mitchell Wing of the State Library of New South Wales. There is more than a tenuous connection between the Founders of the Australian Historical Society and each of these events. It is significant and not surprising that a strong tie has existed between the Society and The Mitchell Library and the State Library of New South Wales through the years. This tie commenced with David Scott Mitchell himself, the Society's first Patron and F M Bladen who became Principal Librarian and was in 1901 one of the Society's first Councillors.

Australia 80 years ago had just been through an exciting and stirring period "the nineties" throughout which Australians had been working towards securing the union of the Australian colonies. The spirit of Federation, the most important national movement that had ever been engaged in, naturally was as much alive in New South Wales as the other States. The Commonwealth of Australia, with its population of only 3 3/4 million, in fact celebrated its birthday as a united nation on January 1, 1901, only weeks before the inaugural meeting of the Australian Historical Society. The Founders of the Society had to contend with the then widely held view: Australia is a land with a great future and almost no past - hers has been a brief and uneventful story. There had been no terrible natural disasters; no wars had happened in America, Africa and New Zealand during the 19th century and no menacing race problems. Many Australians regrettably shared the belief that their country did not have a history. The epic pioneering days which were soon to provide a rich storehouse of material for historical writers were not generally recognised in 1901 as historically significant.

The small group of Sydney historians eager to establish a Society had to persist with their objectives to foster an interest in Australia's achievements prior to the birth of the Commonwealth, to rescue valuable historical material from oblivion and to preserve old relics and landmarks. They wanted some record for the future, of Australia's past, in particular the events witnessed during the preceding four or five generations.

Preliminary discussions on the formation of an historical society took place during 1898, between John Nobbs, M.L.A. for Granville, the Rev. W.H.H. Yarrington and Edward Dowling, J.P. The Sydney-born John Nobbs, a former Registrar-General's Department officer had been advocating in the Legislative Assembly the establishment of a N.S.W. Archives repository in the building to be erected for The Mitchell Library. William Yarrington, a learned Church of England clergyman, had arrived in Sydney from England at the age of two. The ardent federalist, Edward Dowling, another Sydney native, was Accountant at the Government Printing Office and later Secretary to the Board of Technical Education in New South Wales. The three of them had witnessed the development of Australia during the preceding 50 years.

The Centennial Celebrations of 1888 stimulated some interest in Australian history. *The Picturesque Atlas of Australia* edited by the Honourable Andrew Garran, LL.D., M.L.C., and various other historical reference and biographical works were published at this period. According to J.M. Forde who wrote historical articles for the *Truth* newspaper under the pseudonym "old Chum" for some 35 years, interest was aroused in "Old Sydney" and its history as early as 1893 when a series of articles was published on Sydney's Old Sandhills Cemetery, Elizabeth and Devonshire Streets. A friend of Old Chum's of long standing, Mr Edward Stack of Willoughby, also a native of Sydney, who had been in charge of the Map and Plan Room at the Lands Department for a number of years, discussed with David Scott Mitchell and with Old Chum the articles. He then raised with J.P. McGuanne, another officer of the Lands Department, the founding of an "Old Sydney Society". Mr Stack was doubtful if the Society would receive support as the descendants of early settlers would be "afraid" that unpleasant matter might be recounted at the meetings. The Sydney-born Mitchell had no fear of the success of the Society should it be formed. Dr. Andrew Houson, a native of Parramatta, shared David Scott Mitchell's optimism. It was probably the great collector and the highly respected medico's advice and proffered assistance that persuaded Mr Stack to pursue the venture. He became the Society's first Hon. Secretary. Edward Dowling, the other staunch advocate of the establishment of a Society, as the Secretary of the Australian Federation League, was fully engaged at the time with events associated with Federation.

David Scott Mitchell consented in 1900 to become the Patron of a Society based in Sydney, if the title was altered to the Australian Historical Society. We are indebted to Mitchell for the maturity and foresight of his stand and for his recognition of the status of the word "Australia". It was especially appropriate for Australia's first historical society established in Sydney, the nation's oldest city, at the same time as the Federation of the Australian States.

What became recognised by the Founders as the inaugural meeting of the Australian Historical Society was held in the Queen's Hall, Pitt Street, opposite the Congregational Church on Friday evening, March 15, 1901. Dr Andrew Houson, who became Foundation President, gave a short introductory address tracing the steps by which the Society had

come to be formed and particularly the work of the provisional committee members who had met on a number of occasions since 1898 at the Darlinghurst home of David Scott Mitchell, the residence of Mr and Mrs Alfred Lee at Bondi, the Sydney Town Hall and at his own home, which still stands at 43 Phillip Street, Sydney. (It was then No. 47.)

Dr Houison referred in his address to a recent article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that observed "An Historical Society would have the effect of stimulating the habit of research. It would accumulate a mass of detail, from which the historian of the future would derive much valuable information."

This was an accurate prediction. One of the greatest rewards that the Founders could have hoped for was the publication of the results of scholarly research. The first issue of the Society's *Journal and Proceedings* appeared in 1906. It has now reached its 67th volume and certainly has accumulated over the years a mass of data relating to the history and development of Australia as a civilised nation.

It was said in 1934, during the Victorian Centenary celebrations, and it is appropriate to reaffirm it now, that the year 1901 saw, as well as the birth of the Commonwealth, the birth of the historical sense in Australians. They discovered that Australia had historical things worth preserving, landmarks that should be cherished and progenitors who were worthy of lasting memorials. The first Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia, Sir Edmund Barton, himself a native of Sydney, wrote at the period, "research in our history and the wide publication of its results would be far-reaching value to our political, social and economic life." His brother George Burnett Barton compiled a Centennial Commemorative work: Volume 1 of the *History of New South Wales from the Records* (published in 1889). It was a forerunner of *Historical Records of New South Wales* and *Historical Records of Australia* published by authority between 1892 and 1925.

The prefix "Royal" to the title of the Australian Historical Society was not granted until 1918. By this time half of the Founders were deceased. However, most had survived long enough to witness the wide acceptance of the Society as the authority on historical matters, particularly in New South Wales. It can be said that their persistence in promoting the objectives of the Society were rewarded. The Society received a good press, many articles were contributed under its auspices to Sydney newspapers, especially prior to World War I. Many Councillors participated, Captain J H Watson and Messrs Frank Walker and J.P. McGuanne being the most prolific contributors during the earlier years.

It is unfortunate that biographical notes and observations concerning the Society's Founders and their work were not contributed to the Society's *Journal* by their contemporaries. Mr Frank Walker who died in 1948 was the last survivor, and was the only one honoured by an obituary in the Society's *Journal*. However, in it we learn little biographical information about him. The death in 1913 of Edward

Stack, who perhaps more than anyone else, engineered the establishment of the Society, was overlooked in the Annual Report for that year. The deaths of four other Founders, Norman Selfe, Dr Andrew Houison, Frank Murcott Bladen and Edward Dowling during the preceding fifteen months received only a couple of lines attention in the Annual Report for 1912.

During the first decade questions as to who were the Founders of the Society cropped up repeatedly. In August 1911, the Council adopted the view of the then President, James Dalgarno, as to what should be held to constitute a Founder of an organisation. Mr Dalgarno was not himself a Founder of the Society. He was one of the enthusiastic workers who joined the Society at the same time as Captain J H Watson, within three or four years of its establishment. Dalgarno was another native of Sydney, he was Secretary of the Postal Service for a number of years. His principal point was: In any organisation its birth must be brought about by an individual or individuals whose preliminary actions are needful for its formation. The names of 15 gentlemen were recorded as the Founders of the Society:

Dr Houison Archdeacon Gunther
The Reverend Messrs. Aspinall and Yarrington and
Messrs Bladen, Dowling, Lee, Mann, McGuanne, Mitchell, Nobbs,
Phillips, Selfe, Stack and Walker.

Three were clergymen. Also included were public servants, a member of parliament, a medical doctor, a company director, a non-practising barrister, a shoemaker, a surveyor, an accountant, a civil engineer and a manufacturer's agent. This was a representative group of Australians, as representative of present day membership as 80 years ago. They were not famous men, nevertheless many had made contributions to public life in one direction or another. Mrs Alfred Lee, the first Lady Member of the Society, should not have been excluded from the List of Founders. Provisional committee meetings had taken place at her home prior to 1901 and it is likely that Mrs Lee participated in them.

Thomas H Lennard who had attended four Provisional Committee Meetings likewise deserves recognition as a Founder. A further 25 persons joined the Society during its inaugural year. Included were Professor G A Wood of the University of Sydney, the Government Botanist, J.H.Maiden, Mr & Mrs A.G. Foster, Canon F B Boyce and J. Arthur Dowling of the distinguished legal family. They were all active members of the Society for many years. Of the persons elected to membership at the beginning of the second year of operation, W.S. Campbell, George Collingridge and Miss Grace Hency-Pooley are notable for prominent roles they played in historical research during the early decades of the 20th century.

34/207/5

HEAVE, HO TOGETHER SHE GOES ... Bridge marks 50th Year ...

- Richard Eckersley
The Sydney Morning Herald
19th August 1980.

Fifty years ago today, the north and south sections of the Harbour Bridge inched together and touched. Within hours the arch was joined.

It had been preceded by a dramatic and anxious ten days.

The two arms of the arch, each 250 metres long and weighing 15,000 tonnes, were just more than a metre apart when completed, supported by 128 cables anchored in horseshoe-shaped tunnels on either shore. Workmen worked around the clock in 12-hour shifts to close the gap by slowly slackening the cables.

On the night of August 13, in the middle of this operation, severe squalls hit Sydney, with gusts up to 110kms an hour. Those working on the Bridge reported that the two giant arms were visibly swaying, although checks showed that the movement was slight.

On the final day, the tremendous task of joining the two sections was made more difficult by the expansion of the steel under a hot sun. At one moment the alignment of the arms would be correct. Fifteen minutes later there would be an apparent error of several centimetres. At 4.15p.m. the gap was closed for the first time, but opened again as the steel contracted in the cool of the evening. It was not until the early hours of August 20 that the arms were finally locked together with huge pins.

The event was proclaimed by the flying of two flags, the Union Jack and the Australian flag, from the jibs of the cranes on top of the arch. Ships and ferries sounded their sirens and people cheered as they went to work. It then remained to suspend from the arch the steel deck to carry the traffic.

The Bridge, begun in 1923, was opened in 1932.

Today, it is considered to be no longer adequate, and there is a debate over whether a second harbour crossing should be a tunnel or another bridge. If a bridge is built, it is unlikely to resemble the Harbour Bridge. It is mainly a matter of cost.

In bridges, unlike cathedrals, aesthetics do not play a big part. Economics and safety are the key factors. There were then, and still are, three basic ways of spanning distances of that length, according to a Sydney consultant engineer, Mr Jim Corlett. These are by arch bridges, like the Harbour Bridge; suspension bridges, like San Francisco's Golden Gate; and box-girder, cable-stayed bridges, like Melbourne's Westgate.

"Major competitions for bridges attract many suspension and box-girder designs. You don't see much of steel arches these days," he said. Suspension and box-girder bridges need less material and so are cheaper to build.

To mark the jubilee of the arch, films of the construction of the Bridge will be shown at 8.00p.m. on Thursday at the parish hall, St. John's Anglican Church, Gordon.

THE STRAIN RELAXES -

A story from the Herald on August 20, 1930.

At 5 o'clock Mr Lawrence Ennis, the bridge builder and Mr Ralph Freeman, the designer, reached solid earth with flushed, triumphant faces. Their eyes told a story of tremendous strain suddenly relaxed. The lowering process had not been completed, but the anxiety was over. The pins would never move completely apart again.

The last stage developed into a race between the men who were releasing the cables and the the falling temperature. After 5 o'clock the steelwork contracted so rapidly that the slackening cables could not keep the arch arms together, although the pilot pins were still in their sockets. Under the glare of arc lights, with whistles shrilling and telephones ringing, the slow battle dragged on, hour by hour, until towards midnight the arms began again to approach each other.

In the early morning hours human patience won. The arms touched, the pins thrust firmly into their sockets, and the terrific strain of all that steel rested no longer on the cables, but on the bearings that will hold its weight for all time.

Above the sleeping city the bridge-builders smiled, shook hands, and then went home to bed. The job was done.

LOOK! Cockatoo, an island of mixed tales...

- Edited by Geraldine O'Brien
The Sydney Morning Herald
September 18, 1980.

*From a prison island to a busy dockyard.
That's the history of the largest island
in Sydney Harbour. - Margaret Smith, reports.*

The Island People.

"The isle is full of noises, sounds..."

It could be that the sounds of Cockatoo Island, the largest island in Sydney Harbour, are not only the daytime hum and clang of Australia's oldest dockyard, with its 2,000 commuting workers. Some of the children who live on the island say they occasionally hear an eerie sound at night - as if ghostly chains were dragging across stone floors when a man walks in leg irons. Imagined or not, these would have been familiar sounds when the convict chain gangs worked there.

Cockatoo is yet another Harbour island where convicts once toiled, virtually as slaves, in chains, quarrying, stonebreaking and building. Some even died by the hangman. But since those brutal, far-off days, the island has been - and still is - a place where families live happily in graceful, mellow houses of another age. Flame trees blaze in old gardens with dramatic water views. Sheep graze, birds and fruit bats find sanctuary.

Cockatoo Island, about 16 hectares (40 acres) lies off Hunters Hill, Drummoyne and Rozelle, at the entrance to the Parramatta River. It's now virtually a huge dockyard owned by the Commonwealth and leased to Vickers, the British-based company, for building and repairing both naval and commercial ships.

Eight Vickers executives live there. The old prison buildings, with their chapel, facing a high-walled quadrangle, are now used as administrative and training offices.

Cockatoo Island's residents share certain amenities. In summer if a dry dock is not in use they make it a swimming pool. There's a launch service to the city every half hour - it's 20 minutes to Circular Quay. After 11.00p.m. the launch is by special request.

The island was uninhabited until 1839, when convicts were moved there from Norfolk Island. They built wells and 20 underground grain stores, each about six metres (20 feet) deep in the solid sandstone; quarried and built their own prison and hacked out Fitzroy Dock, which is still in use. In 1870, the prison was used for both sexes, but from 1871 new male prisoners went to Darlinghurst jail. From 1909, the island ceased being a prison, and was slowly developed into a dockyard.

This island of ships, and birds, and melancholy ghosts was known to the Aborigines before European settlement as Biloela, island of cockatoos. The birds vanished long ago together with the thickly forested red gums they nested in. But white cockatoos and flocks of galahs occasionally visit the island, and plenty of mainland birds live there.

Two ducks still fly over daily from Hunters -ill for a special feed at the docks. And an ordinary farmyard goose found a home with the Morris family. "Bruce the goose" as they named her, was found floating off the island last April, somewhat bemused, although still the right way up. It was thought she had half flown, half swum, from Hunters Hill, where she had probably been a household pet.

Judy Morris (her husband, Clem, is personnel manager at Vickers' Cockatoo Dockyard) installed Bruce on the grass tennis court of their 1924 house. "When sailors sometimes come up to play volleyball on the court, Bruce likes watching from the sidelines. I'd really miss her if she went off now," said Mrs Morris.

The three Morris children grew up in the 10 years the family has lived on Cockatoo. One son, Mark, still commutes to his accountancy job in the city. "We'll be sad to leave here when I retire," said Clem Morris. "Besides, I've only three minutes walk to work." It's down several flights of stone steps to his office below a sandstone cliff.

Next door live Graham Cole, Vickers' marketing manager, his wife, Margaret and their two school-age children, Matthew 16 and Alison, 15. Matthew and Alison recalled their childhood on the island as something special. "We had a cubbyhouse at the back of a silo", said Alison. "We always had something exciting to do, exploring, finding caves," said Matthew. "A friend and I once got up a crane and water bombed a night security guard." He grinned at the memory.

Alison remembered a cave in a cliff where you could meditate, gazing at a wonderful view of the water - until dockyard equipment got in the way. It was by the largest fig tree on the island, where the bats sometimes hang out," said Matthew.

He senses an atmosphere from the convict days. "When you stand in that prison square, you feel something's going on." He said that Frederick Ward, the notorious Captain Thunderbolt, escaped to the mainland in 1868 after hiding on the island. It was one of few escapes from the guards and the sharks.

Matthew Cole insists he and some friends have heard several times at night the sudden ghostly sound of chains dragged over stone, from the direction of the prison quadrangle, and also from the garden of "the Governor's cottage" on the island summit. And there's a legend about that house being haunted by a convict's ghost.

The single-storey house with stone flagged verandas and a secluded courtyard, was built in 1889 as quarters for the women's prison warders. It's thought that later it was converted, with a ballroom, as some high official's home. It's now two flats for Vicker's executives.

One of these has been the home of Charles Yandell, production manager at the dockyard, and his wife, Irene, for the past five years. They revel in the four graceful rooms, and the water views beyond the flame trees on the back lawn. Mrs Yandell smiles and nods cheerfully when you mention the ghostly legend. "Yes, our predecessors here are supposed to have heard mysterious footsteps in the hall. But we haven't. Although I believe in ghosts, I don't think there's a ghost in this house." But she keeps a little lamp burning night and day in the hall "just to be on the safe side. I often wish these walls could talk."

Past a water tower, and sheep grazing on a green patch with a backdrop of cranes, you come to another old house divided in two.

On the ground floor lives Bob Ridgley, weapons superintendent at the dockyard, his wife June and their 16 year-old son Adrian, who goes to Hunters Hill High School. Mrs Ridgley smiled at stories of ghostly manifestations, but admitted to a poltergeist presence in her family called George. "He makes things mysteriously disappear and then reappear." They were all resigned to it now, and accepted George as one of the family.

After 16 years of unconventional surroundings, June Ridgley happily says nothing could surprise her now. She's already brought up 5 children on the island, all gone their separate ways. Her back garden has a common wall with the prison quadrangle, and a ruined armoury. Below the back wall lies the dockyard. "I've sailors at the bottom on my garden," she laughed, waving towards the towering grey superstructure of HMAS Jervis Bay, a naval training ship, the Balmain shore and the city skyline beyond. "I've always loved the seclusion, and being here on my own. And by now I take all the views for granted."

The Ridgley's son, Adrian, at 16 still enjoys the home he's known all his life. He finds the island private and peaceful. "You can leave anything out, trust anyone. And there's always fishing, and something to explore."

That afternoon, Mrs Ridgley welcomed Mr Harrie Ramsay of North Eppint, a spritely 93, a former printer and local newspaper editor. Mr Ramsay lived in the same house as the Ridgleys from babyhood to nearly 9 years old. It was built as a home for the prison superintendent in 1868. His father held the post from 1887 when Harrie Ramsay was 13 months old, until he moved to Goulburn 8 years later. Mr Ramsay has visited Cockatoo several times, but this time he enjoyed comparing childhood memories with Matthew Cole and Adrian Ridgley - memories with 77 years between them.

"We had the run of the island: all 10 of us and other children too," Mr Ramsay said. He recalled sadly how excavations to develop the island as a dockyard had removed his old familiar places. "The hill they took down had caves.. We'd play in the caves, or run about and watch the men working or climb down the dry dock when it was empty." Mr Ramsay looked down at the slipways far below, with the Harbour and Hunters Hill beyond. "It was all grassed paddock down there when I knew it. We kept a cow, my father had it brought by ferry from King Street wharf. They widened the island later to make the slipways."

He strolled back towards the house and looked up at the veranda. "It was a lovely veranda - though it wasn't glassed in then, in the 1890s. We used to watch Mr Dunn's punts go up and down the river."

The convicts over the garden wall had an impact even on a small boy's life. He recalled how shouts and screams from the solitary confinement cell sometimes kept him awake. "I can hear him now, calling to my father, 'Let me out Mr Ramsay, let me out.' It was frightening." But there were happy contacts with convicts working as domestic servants in the superintendent's house. "We children would talk to the prisoners. I remember the cook made hominy, a maize porridge, but the prisoners hated it."

The two boys and Mr Ramsay compared their cave experiences. Then the boys asked him whether any of the trees looked the same. Mr Ramsay recognised a stand of acacia trees and a huge Moreton Bay fig tree. "Are there any castor oil trees left .. does the lolly man still come around?" he asked. The boys shook their heads.

On the way back to the wharf Harrie Ramsay pointed up to the shorn off sandstone cliff. "My caves were all up there, the side facing Woolwich.. they're different worlds, then and now," he reflected sadly. "They took the top off the island and made it a dockyard."
