

# St. George Historical Society Inc. Bulletin

PROUDLY SPONSORED BY ROCKDALE CITY COUNCIL

NOVEMBER – DECEMBER 2003 EDITION

## *Merry Xmas*



## *Happy New Year*

PRESIDENT	Mr. Bernard Sharah	(02) 9567 – 8989
SECRETARY	Mrs. Valda Beehag	(02) 9546 – 2819
TREASURER	Mrs. Dora Lenane	(02) 9181 – 2121
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT	Mrs. Bettye Ross	0408 – 117 - 065
VICE PRESIDENT	Mr. Wesley Fairhall	(02) 9546 - 5555
RESEARCH OFFICERS	Mrs. Bettye Ross	0408 – 117 - 065
	Mrs. Betty Williams	(02) 9868 – 1989
	Mrs. Norrene Burns	(02) 9546 – 1165
SOCIAL SECRETARIES	Mrs. Dora Lenane	(02) 9181 – 2121
	Mrs. Joan Fairhall	(02) 9546 – 5555
PUBLICITY OFFICER	Mrs. Joan Fairhall	(02) 9546 – 5555
BULLETIN EDITOR	The Henke Family	(02) 9587 – 8307
LYDHAM HALL COMMITTEE	Mrs. Bettye Ross	0408 – 117 - 065
	Mrs. Gloria Henke	(02) 9587 – 8307
	Mr. Bernard Sharah	(02) 9567 – 8989
PUBLIC OFFICER	Mr. Robert McGarn	(02) 9587 – 4469
REFRESHMENTS OFFICER	Mr. Allan Stahl	(02) 9556 – 2805
AUDITOR	Mrs. L. Thompson	

Meetings are held 8:00 PM the second Tuesday of the month (except January) in the Meeting Room 1st Floor, Rockdale Town Hall, Princes Highway, Rockdale. Members, please bring a plate. Visitors are welcome.

## NOVEMBER – DECEMBER EVENTS AGENDA

### EVENTS

**Dec 7th      Lydham Hall Christmas Party**

For members and friends and guests. 12 pm – 4 pm please, bring a plate.

**Dec 9<sup>th</sup>      St. George Historical Society Christmas meeting**

Peter Sage will entertain us with:

**“SYDNEY NOSTALGIA”**

A nostalgic look back at the Sydney of the 1950’s to the 1970’s. A reminder of by-gone sights and experiences, many of which are now memories.

### THANK YOU

We the Editors of the St George Historical Society Journal, would like to thank all those who have assisted us by supplying articles for our Journal through 2003.

A big thank you also goes to Mrs. Joan Fairhall for Advertising our meetings and inviting interesting speakers to entertain us. Betty Goodger and Beverly Earnshaw to name a couple. Thank you Joan.

The Henke Family

## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

The rapid approach of Christmas provides an opportune to review events of the last few months as well as announce some important proposed changes to the Society. The most important of these is the proposed change to a daytime meeting. One change engenders others. Approval of a daytime meeting would automatically entail a change of venue as well because we would not be able to meet at Rockdale Town Hall during the day.

A number of factors have forced us to consider these proposed changes.

Most importantly, it is increasingly apparent that a growing number of people are reluctant to attend meetings at night. Concerns about security and the problems associated with night time driving are the main considerations.

The difficulties associated with night time meetings affect not only our own Society but many other community organizations. For this reason many such organizations now have day time meetings. Some have chosen to meet during the normal working week. While this arrangement may suit retired people it tends to exclude the potential for recruiting younger people with work commitments. Accordingly, the committee favours holding meetings on weekends when both retired and working people can attend.

Of course there is always the option of staying with our existing time and venue. However, to not change and to continue at our present venue and time would entail the loss of at least one member whose contribution to the Society has been enormous. There are also others who would prefer to attend daytime meetings.

These proposals require amendments to our constitution and as such will be put to a meeting convened specifically for this purpose. The Date chosen is our Meeting on Tuesday February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004. In the meantime please think about these proposals and let us know what you think.

Now a quick review of the past few months. Lydham Hall continues to be the focus of the Society's activities. A number of local schools have visited, among them sixty students from St Declan's Peshurst. Managing and co-ordinating the visit of large numbers of young children can be a daunting task in itself. But thanks to our volunteers giving up their valuable time these events have been carried off smoothly. By encouraging young students to visit our historic house museum we hope to stimulate their appreciation of local history and heritage as well as raising the profile of the St George Historical Society.

One of Lydham Hall's many advantages is that it provides a delightful venue for wedding ceremonies and a number of these have taken place over the last few months.

We have received very positive feedback from those attending. We are also indebted to Rockdale City Council for the recent improvements made to the house. The external painting of the building has been completed as well as some internal repainting. Of course, maintenance and restoration of a one hundred and forty year old (plus) building is an ongoing task and much remains to be done.

In closing I would like to thank all members have generously donated their time and efforts to the advancement of the Society. Special mention should be made of Bettye Ross whose project for indexing the St George Historical Society's Bulletins since inception recently received a Royal Australian Historical Society history grant. Bettye has contributed incalculable hours to this important task. More needs to be done, however, and if you are able to assist in this project please contact her. Your efforts will be much appreciated.

On behalf of the committee I wish you all a happy and safe Christmas.

Kind regards,

Bernard Sharah



**The St. George Historical Society Anniversary Tour. July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003.**

We are sorry to say that this tour was cancelled due to lack of interest

The Society agreed to run these tours not only to have a pleasant get together but to hopefully increase the Finances of our Society.

We have ongoing costs such as Insurance, Membership to an Affiliated Society, postage and at times the reprinting of our Historical books. We are committed to meeting these costs and the Members embracing the tours are helping to raise Funds and help the Society in a positive manner combined with congenial enjoyment.

**Bus Outing on October 7<sup>th</sup> 2003.**

On Friday 7<sup>th</sup> October we left Ormond Parade Hurstville for our outing, proceeding by bus through Wollongong Road Bexley, Arncliffe, Wolli Creek and onto Tempe, St. Peters, where we stopped to inspect the old Bricks Works, now called Sydney Park. From there we travelled to St. Peters Anglican Church where we stopped for morning tea and to view their Museum and Church.

On departure we were driven past many interesting places including various old hospitals and churches, the Abbey, the Witches Houses, then stopped again at the Drummoyne Rowing Club for lunch where a table had been booked for us.

During the day we were driven through the old Callan Park Grounds and thence onto Birkenhead Point where we all alighted from the bus to view the shops there. The "Girls" found a shoe shop with "specials" on good quality leather shoes at good sale prices. The shop did well and the Girls were pleased with their purchases.

We also drove over the "Anzac Bridge" and up to Ultimo wending our way homewards.

As we saw so many interesting places, there are too many to mention in my summary.

A happy day was enjoyed by all and a big thank you to Dora for arranging "our day".

Betty Williams.

**A Message from "The Senior Citizens"**

**To** : Those in our society who criticize seniors for every conceivable deficiency of this modern world.

**From** : The Seniors Citizens

**Message** : We take responsibility for all we have done and do not blame others. BUT, upon reflection, we would like to point out that it was NOT the senior citizens who took:

- The melody out of music.
- The pride out of appearance.
- The romance out of love.
- The commitment out of marriage.
- The responsibility out of parenthood.
- The togetherness out of the family.
- The learning out of education.
- The service out of patriotism.
- The Golden Rule from rulers.
- The civility out of behaviour.
- The refinement out of language.
- The dedication out of employment.
- The prudence out of spending.
- The ambition out of achievement.
- Prayers and Christmas out of the public schools.
- The acceptance of lying and deceit from Society.
- The "if it feels good, Do it" attitude regardless of the consequences for those around you.
- And we certainly are NOT the ones who eliminated patience and tolerance from personal relationships and interactions with others.

Remember... Inside every older person is a younger person wondering what the heck happened?

## COMO: Suburb 20 km. South of Sydney, NSW

Copy of Field Study: The Historical Environment  
Assignment for Local History 222, New England  
University - External Student 1997: Bettye I. Ross

The area I have chosen is COMO itself, located on the southern shore of the Georges River. There is a Como West but this is quite a separate area with a few shops, a Doctor's Surgery, Veterinarian a Service Station and new Primary School (built February/March 1994) as the whole school and sixty two of the surrounding homes were burnt to the ground.

Why I chose COMO is because of its very early settlement in this, the Sutherland Shire, though many of those early timber homes have long gone. However it is fairly quiet, largely unspoilt and its landscape not denuded.

Como envelops the area on the east to the base of the hillside of Riverview Road, Oyster Bay, on the south side at the far end of Oyster Bay Road, Oyster Bay and on the west one residential block of houses on the other side up from Como Railway Station, though its shoreline is Como.

The south side of Georges River was the draw card for the early settlers due to the large quantity of fish available though sharks were found as far up river as Picnic Point, a few kilometers west, even in the 1960's. These settlers could toss up a humpy and no one was any wiser that they were there due to the isolation. The water here is deep but unfortunately like most of our river systems polluted by industrial wastes and residents' carelessness. An abundance of oysters grew here and oyster beds were the basis of many a family's sustenance. Sales of oysters along this river in 1880's amounted to 92 bags<sup>1</sup> of spawn and 169 bags of remarkable oysters, though not all were from the immediate beds at Como.

The Honourable Thomas Holt attempted oyster cultivation at that time but oyster harvesting was already an early industry. Divers swam to depths of more than fifteen feet collecting mud and rock oysters, but diving suits were worn at greater depths.<sup>2</sup>

All oyster beds have now gone due to pollution of the river and with this went the largest and longest maintained industry in the history of the Sutherland Shire.

When settlers first came across the river to this side many of them were single men with worldly experience of work but no real trade. As early Colonists they were "jacks of all trades and master of none" but could turn their hand to most things satisfactorily. They settled along, or adjoining, the shores in their little humpies, bathing and washing in the river thus becoming its earliest polluters. They fished, grew a few vegetables and later kept a few fowls. Across from Como on the plateau above the Woronora River, an offshoot of Georges River, many families squatted and ran poultry, pig farms and orchards, naming the area Menai and later Bangor. The mouth of this river was discovered in 1794 by Bass and Flinders<sup>3</sup> as part of a wider hydrographic survey of the coastline.

John Lucas, son of First Fleeter Convict Nathaniel Lucas, had built a water driven mill at the junction of the Woronora River where the fresh water met it and so to avoid long delays, Wharfage and Customs at Port Jackson, many south coast craft carried their grain for grinding through Botany Bay Heads up the Georges River turning left at Como and up to Lucas' Mill.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately after about twenty years service the mill burnt down and no sign of its actual site can be found today. This same Lucas incidentally gained the first grant in the Woronora, Lucas Heights, Barden Ridge, Bangor, Menai and Illawong areas as we know them now. Then it was termed as the Parish of Liverpool. Today though that

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<sup>1</sup> M. Hutton Neve, *Development of Commerce & Industry*, Sutherland Shire Studies No.4

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> M. Hutton Neve, *A Brief History of Sutherland Shire*, Sutherland Shire Studies No. 1

<sup>4</sup> F. Midgeley, *Illustrated History of the Sutherland Shire*, Pub. Sutherland Historical Press, Suth. 1969

part of the area is still referred to as Lucas Heights the homes have become known as being in Barden Ridge. Barden was another early settler. Today Lucas' name is only borne by the Lucas Heights Waste Disposal Tip and the Lucas Heights Atomic Energy Resource Centre. A pity a name like Lucas Grove wasn't given to old Lucas Heights to separate it from the connection pertaining to both the Tip and the Atomic Energy Plant.

In the mid 1880's Sydney had become a busy, bustling city and the German Concordia Club built a private residential, recreational and social Club for its members in this quiet backwater of Double Bay (later called Scylla and Carina Bays, Como).<sup>5</sup> The building stood on the lower part of a timbered hillside and was raised above the high level watermark of the bay water lapping at its frontage. The hillside to the rear of this building was of Hawkesbury shale with some sandstone beds and the soil grew profusely blackbutt trees, ironbark, turpentine, stringybark and smooth bark angophora trees, small shrubs and wildflowers.<sup>6</sup>

This German Club was to become the most important and outstanding building of the area right up to October, 1996 when it burnt to the ground.

In 1883 the Sydney Rail Company began to contemplate spreading its services further south so the largest British Box Railway Bridge ever installed in Australia was shipped to Sydney. It had been prefabricated at Captain Cook's birthplace, Middlesborough.<sup>7</sup> The bridge completed November was officially opened December 1885 thus linking the north and south sides of the Georges River at Como. It was a single track and today has been replaced by a new double track bridge built alongside, but the old one has been made into a much used walking and cycling track from Como to Oatley. It still retains the name of Como Bridge, the other one is called the rail bridge across the river.

In the course of the rail bridge's erection 1884 the hillside behind the German Concordia Club was virtually laid bare of both trees and ground vegetation. At the time of the construction of the rail line the workers needed to be housed and as many were of German origin they were taken to the German Club. Over six hundred people inhabited the isthmus between Carina and Scylla Bay in tents or shanties and a lean to shed called the Woronora Hotel came into being, later being replaced by an iron building and still later surrounded by a verandah. Nearby a Police building was constructed and as there were eighty children of these rail workers in need of schooling as early as 1884 a School was being constructed on the site<sup>8</sup> now named Verona Range. This school was later removed, enlarged and opened up a few hundred metres south around 1916.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately still more trees were lost in the establishment of both schools.

A mud and stone causeway was built across from the *Winnie* (Woronora Hotel) to the German Club should the liquid refreshments run out for these hard working men.

The German Consul frequented the German Concordia Club on many occasions arriving in his elaborate craft with equally elaborate uniformed aides having rowed him from Botany Bay.<sup>10</sup> The area had become a popular one for picnics as well as for fishing and quiet relaxation.

James Murphy was Overseer for Holt's Sutherland Estate for thirty years and felt the region of the junction of the Georges River and Woronora Rivers resembled Lake Como in northern Italy near the Swiss border and bought up the land there as Holt disposed of it. He built a home which he called Como House on the west side of the rail line looking westwards up the river. Murphy had traveled world wide and came to Australia with the first diamond drilling rig, sunk bores and found coal throughout Sutherland (pre Shire) for Thomas Holt. He then had a circular promenade built around the rocky outcrop on the east side of the rail line 1886 and erected a large pavilion for dances and parties

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<sup>5</sup> D. Salt, *Como Hotel, 1880-1996*, Daphne Salt, Prospect Pl. Como 1997

<sup>6</sup> *Landscape Historical Archaeology for Sutherland Shire Council*, Sept. 1993, prepared by W. Ashton, Landscape Architect, 33 Elvina Av., Newport.

<sup>7</sup> P. Neve, *Railways (and Tramways) in the Sutherland Shire*, Sutherland Shire Studies No. 6

<sup>8</sup> Salt, p.2

<sup>9</sup> D.R. Kirby, *From Sails to Atoms, First fifty years of Sutherland Shire, 1906-1956*, Pub. Aid, Syd. 1970

<sup>10</sup> Interview Mr. Thomas Young, Como, March 1995, re oral history from his grandfather 1920's.

connecting to what had become known as the Como Hotel.<sup>11</sup> With the opening of the rail line many people came for picnics and to spend time in the surrounds and on the waterways. By now a number of small boat sheds had been built and were hiring out craft to the picnickers. Because of Murphy's (later Como's) Pleasure Grounds being such a rocky area few of the trees needed to be sacrificed. Later a number of summer houses, swings, razzle-dazzles and swimming baths were installed. It had become a most popular haven from the city.

Today very little has altered in the latter area except that the salt water baths have been remeshed as many of the jelly blubbers were able to squeeze through the old nets, and a more modern chlorinated pool has been built on the area immediately above the old baths. Also a number of barbeque facilities have been put in place. The old pavilion has long gone and the parking area has been leveled though thankfully not modernly concreted. It still has an untouched bush appearance. The old boat shed has been modernized to serve light meals and morning and afternoon teas, and the old general store and residence has become a corner shop selling sweets, ice creams and a few necessities as required by those at the recreation grounds. The residence has become a Reception Centre for weddings etc. under the name of Cafe de Como and is widely used as it is not as updated as other reception facilities and tends to make functions there like the old fashioned weddings in the home.

The expanse of water in front of Como Hotel did disappear a good deal at low tide. In 1929 the area of Scylla Bay was gazetted to be filled in and many men were employed for one or two days a week to lead a horse and dray like vehicle loaded with filling down to the bay to fill it. These men, many with a good number of children, were in a bad way due to the depression. There was no work and they could only exist along with their families by growing their own food and fishing. Two food coupons were given for each two days work. The work was hard and the hours were long but the filling of this bay, which today is a sports field, probably saved many a person from near starvation. Tennis Courts have today joined this facility and newcomers would be quite unaware of its original appearance.

At high tide Henry Lawson, who lived just beyond the junction of the Woronora and Georges Rivers used to arrive in his small boat, tie it up on the shoreline below Como Hotel and slake his thirst therein, often not paying but reciting his poetry or telling some of his tales to the patrons as payment. Many a happy and congenial evening was spent by Lawson and his listeners. Just past where he lived was a cave which Lawson called the Bonnet<sup>12</sup> because of its shape and which today has been encompassed in the suburb of Bonnet Bay. The aborigines sheltered here and a number of their tribe were buried in another cave nearby. It is quite unspoilt, as I said like most of Como, and in the surrounds are many hidden middens protected by the canopies and needles from the casuarinas trees above. Aboriginal artifacts and some rock sharpening or grinding grooves are under protection in the area and residents nearby and in the vicinity of the Henry Lawson Reserve are mindful of its Aboriginal heritage.

Because of the abundance on the foreshores of mangroves it is felt as pollution is checked the fishing and oyster industry will return as well as other marine life such as crabs, eels etc. and the many species of migratory birdlife will not be endangered.

There is an abundance of bird-life and some recorded are the New England, Yellow faced, Lewin, Recent, Yellow-tufted, and White eyed Honeyeaters, Black faced cuckoo-shrike, Golden bronze, Brush and Fantailed cuckoos, Eastern spinebill, Little and Striated thornbills, spotted pardalote, Red browed finch, Silver-eye, Blue and variegated wrens, Tawny Frogmouth, Spangled Drongo, Noisy friar-bird, Rufous whistler, Red robin, Williewagtail, Sparrow, Grey butcher bird, Little and Yellow wattle birds, Bulbul, Hawks, Sea eagles, Eastern magpie, Crimson rozella, Rainbow lorikeet, King parrots and more.<sup>13</sup> A delightful place for Neville W. Cayley.

The Marsupial mouse, sugar glider, ringtail possum, monotreme, echidna, bicolor wallaby, and foxes have also been spotted in the vegetation of the area as well as one deer in the 1994 bushfires.

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<sup>11</sup> Salt, p.3

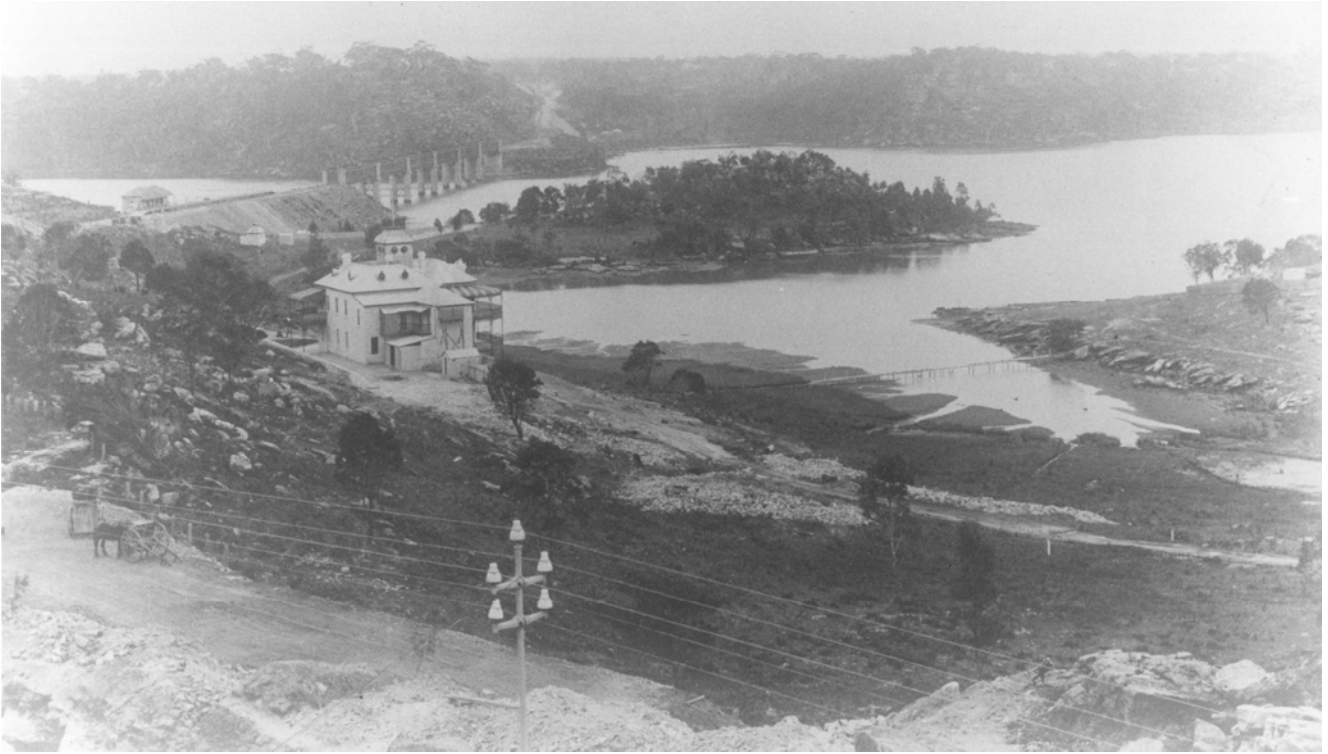
<sup>12</sup> *Impact of Development of the Foreshores at Como, June 1981.* Sutherland Shire Local Studies Lib.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p.10



Some improvements have been made since the filling of Scylla Bay as Canna Bay has also been filled, unfortunately a great deal of its mangrove sites, but a small creek has been left to meander up to the junction of Oyster Bay Rd. Oyster Bay and Tivoli Esplanade, Como which has proved of great benefit after heavy rains as it prevents flooding of this filled area for it has now been designated a horse and dog recreational and display field.

I'm sure the rectification of Georges River pollution and the rebuilding of the Como Hotel will return this pristine area to its condition of earlier times even though it has been settled.



Como Hotel and the Como Bridge



Como Hotel and the Como Bridge