

St. George Historical Society Inc. Bulletin

PROUDLY SPONSORED BY ROCKDALE CITY COUNCIL

JANUARY - MARCH 2007 EDITION

Vale



Ron Rathbone O.A.M.

1931-1970

RONALD W. RATHBONE

Ronald William Rathbone was born on 9 October, 1931 at Bexley. He was the second child of William Odell Rathbone, a potter, and Elsie May Rathbone nee Rocavert. William, their first child, died thirteen days after birth.

When Ron was almost five, I was born and, despite the fact that I was not the baby at the hospital he had waited for a sister, we had many times, together with our cousin, John, in our childhood and teenage years.

Ron was educated at Carlton Public School, Kogarah Intermediate Boys High School and Canterbury Boys High School and trained at Balmain Teachers' College.

At Carlton Public School he did not get on well with his fifth class teacher and, on one of many occasions that he was kept in, took a handful of sand from the air raid bucket and sprinkled it onto his teacher in the playground three storeys below. For this misdemeanour he received a caning from the principal not for pouring sand on the teacher, however, but for undermining the war effort by wasting the A.R.P sand.

During Ron's adolescence he became fascinated with politics and spent most of his sports periods at Canterbury Boys' High in the public library or the visitors' gallery at Parliament House in Macquarie Street. As soon as he was old enough he joined the Young Liberals at Kogarah.

After graduating from teachers' college he was posted to the country where he served as a relief teacher before taking up a permanent appointment at Narrabri. There he became secretary of the Narrabri Branch of the Country Party.

Following three year's country service Ron returned to Sydney and, after a short time at Revesby, spent a year's working holiday in England and Europe. Such was his ability to tame the wildest children that, on his departure, the staff and his class at the John Keeble School, London and the principal at Harlsden Primary, London, presented Ron with gifts of appreciation for the impact his short stay had had on each of their schools.

Back in Australia Ron became President of the Bexley Branch of the Liberal Party building the membership from 40 to 244 and establishing another branch in Carlton – West Kogarah.

Our father was always critical of the local council and in 1957 when Ron could not talk him into standing for election he decided to stand himself. So hard did he campaign that, even as a lone independent, he went within 65 votes of topping the poll. He was just 28 and he had been elected outright.

After a short time at Punchbowl and Kingsgrove public schools Ron finally achieved his goal of being appointed to Bexley. He was now living at one end of his ward and working at the other and the 24 years he spent at Bexley Public School turned out to be the most satisfying and enjoyable years of his life.

In 1968 it was a great thrill for Ron, now representing the Progress Association, to be elected Mayor for the first time and he served four terms in that capacity. The highlights of this time for him were organising and presiding over the Rockdale Council Centenary Celebrations in 1971 and attending the Sister City Celebrations in Bitola, Macedonia in 1984. Ron was the longest serving councillor and mayor in Rockdale's history. When he finally stepped down from being mayor, among the many expressions of appreciation and regret, the comment he valued most was made by a lady he did not know in the car park. She said, "Mr Rathbone, you don't know me although I am a resident of Rockdale. I just wanted to tell you that you are one of the very few people in public life that I trust and I always feel safe when you are the mayor".

During his time on the council he was appointed the Local Government Representative on the Heritage Council of NSW from 1993 – 1996 and for his services to local government he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1987 and both the Local Government Association Medal and the Centenary of Federation Medal in 2001.

In 1962 Ron was foundation secretary of the St George Historical Society and this became the largest historical society in the state. Ron was the author of many books on local history, his final effort being the history of Rockdale, completed with the assistance of his friend, Jennifer Lee, a couple of weeks before he died. He also wrote four articles for the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

In 1972 Ron was invited to join the board of the Benevolent Society of NSW. He was appointed from 1977 to 1988 including treasurer for the Royal Hospital for Women and from 1993 to 1998 was president. He authored the Society's first official history, "A Very Present Help" in 1974. Ron guided the Society through the sale of its Paddington site after the transfer of the Royal Hospital for Women to Randwick and, with the proceeds, presided over the largest expansion of the Society's activities in its history.

From 1971 to 1994 Ron was Chairman of and Company Manager of the Rockdale Municipal Orchestra & Opera Company. He saved the company from extinction in 1971 when the Council decided to withdraw its subsidy. He reorganised it and placed it on a sound financial footing. He handled the entire administration for 22 years and was presented with a Strauss Medallion by the City of Vienna for his efforts to maintain the company.

Ron was a great overseas traveller and entertained many groups with his slide evenings accompanied by witty commentary. Of his many trips those that he enjoyed the most were:

- His first trip to England and Europe where he met members of the family, read the lesson at the laying of the foundation stone of St John's Church at Carlton, Nottingham and spent Christmas in war ravaged Berlin;
- Visiting China in 1967 in the midst of the Cultural Revolution;
- His trip to Europe in 1971, meeting Sir Edward Heath, former British prime minister and member for Bexley, U.K. and returning to Australia across the Trans Siberian Railway.
- In 1978 his trip to Europe, Iceland, Israel and America.

When Ron became ill I asked him to do a list for me of the highlights in his life. Most of these I have already touched on but the list also included:

- Being presented to the Prince and Princess of Wales at a Gala Ball for Benevolent Society in 1983 when Treasurer;
- Moving to the Glen Village in 1996 where he spent 10 happy years;
- The spectacular success of his book "A Village Called Arncliffe" in 1998 and
- Spending time with Joan and Harry each time he visited England.

Others may use words such as selfless, caring, sincere, forthright, witty, knowledgeable, capable, energetic and committed to describe Ron but his close friends and relatives would also add loyal, extremely generous, appreciative, supportive, loving and, in some respects, childlike. I remember from teaching Sunday School one Mother's Day and greeting me in the hallway was a small stuffed tiger Ron had given me, with a white daisy between its paws, a present of tiger balm ointment and a card wishing me 'Happy Mother's Day' from Tip. Was a paragon of virtue? No. Ron did not suffer those he believed to be fools gladly and, once he made his mind about something, like the law of the Medes and Persians, it could not be changed. But let Ron have the last word. As he reviewed his life during the term of his illness and put those thoughts to paper he wrote:

I have been sustained throughout my life by a strong, unshakeable faith that has seen me through the rough passages. As I now enter the final phase of my time upon this earth, I do so with a feeling of enormous gratitude for the rich, varied and very satisfying life that I have lived and for the chance to have been of some service to other people. Above all else, when the time comes for me to depart this existence, I will do so content in the knowledge that I have made the best of the opportunities that came my way and whenever I was given a responsibility I did my utmost to prove worthy of it.

Thank you for honouring Ron and supporting me by your presence today.

Source: Elaine Morey Ron Rathbone's Sister

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Meetings are held 2:00 PM the third Saturday 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.

JANUARY - MARCH EVENTS AGENDA

Mar 22nd Parramatta National Trust visit to Lydham Hall

On this day 46 persons from the Parramatta National Trust visited Lydham Hall and enjoyed it tremendously. They could not believe that such a lovely collection of furniture, and china and other memorabilia could be shown so well in our museum.

Many of our books were purchased during this visit.

Apr 21st St. George Historical Society Meeting

The St. George Historical Society meeting will be held.

MEMORIES OF A FRIENDSHIP

My association, with Ron Rathbone, goes back about 40 years, to the early 1960's.

Before moving to Carlton, my parents had lived in Gibb St, Rockdale. So when a friend told my mother of the Rockdale Historic Society, she joined. I would drive my mother to the Friday evening meeting and pick her up after, I soon realized if I also joined, I would only make one trip to Rockdale. I joined.

The original President was a Mr. Swan, and Ron told me how the society was started. They met in the street one day, and in the course of conversation, Mr. Swan said "We are going to start a Historical Society and you are the Secretary."

In the early days, Ron was the entire society. He organized meetings, outings, correspondence and paid all of the postage.

Through his good offices, we met in the Council Chambers, and his Mother always provided the supper.

After several years, Mr. Swan either died or resigned, and Philip Geeves took over as President. He was an Historian of some note – spoke regularly on the wireless – and considered himself superior to what he called "Parish Pump Societies". He resigned.

I was elected President of a society, which regularly had about 20 to 25 members at the meetings, and I retained this position for 9 years.

In 1970 the Council purchased Lydham Hall from Mr. and Mrs. Long, the latter being a cleaner at Bexley Public School, where Ron taught, and who had decided to sell after winning the Lottery. The Long's vacated several rooms, of Lydham Hall, and about half a dozen of our members would go there every Saturday and strip the woodwork for repolishing.

After the Long's eventually moved out, and we had done our best, Arthur Ellis was instrumental in arranging for us to obtain the loan of suitable furniture from the National Trust, with which to furnish the house.

Lydham Hall was officially opened by Mr. Justice Heron, Chief Justice on February 22nd, 1971 and Ron was there in his capacity as Mayor of Rockdale.



Justice Heron



Mayor Ron Rathbone

Extensions were made to the back of Lydham Hall and Miss. Bet Otten, a member of our Society, moved in as Caretaker.

Our Society grew at a great rate and eventually we never had less than 80 or 90 people at every Meeting. Wet nights didn't dampen their enthusiasm and made no difference to their attendance.

Through our friendship in the Historical Society, Ron later asked me to become Treasurer of the Rockdale Opera Company, and I accepted this position for many years. We came in regular contact and the enthusiasm he had shown in the Historical Society, he also exhibited in the Opera Company.

I have just realized, I did not mention, that somewhere along the way the Society was changed from "Rockdale Historical Society" to "St. George Historical Society" – Kogarah and Hurstville Societies came in some time after this.

Regards. Mr. Don Sinclair.



VALE



The St. George Historical Society extends their condolences to our member Miss. Anne Field whose father Mr. Ronald Field passed away on January 27th, 2007 aged 92.

Mr. Field was always very supportive of his daughter in all her ventures and a very dear person whom many people came to know during her time at Rockdale City Council.



SKERICKS



- St. George Historical Societies Christmas Luncheon

The Christmas Luncheon for the St. George Historical Society will be held at the St. George Rowing Club on December 16th, 2006 and was enjoyed by all those who attended.

- Ron Rathbone's Tribute

On March 31st, 2007 at Rockdale City Council's Meeting a Mayoral Minute was read by General Manager, Mr. Chris Watson, recognizing the Former Mayor, Ron Rathbone's four decades of "**selfless service**" to the City of Rockdale

- Ron Rathbone Local History Prize

In the second year of the Annual Ron Rathbone Local History Prize, we are glad to see, for the first time, the Prize has a contingent, specifically for High School Students.

- Jazz and Soup at St. Peters

The First of their Winter Concerts will be held on May 6th, 2007 at 187 Princes Highway, St. Peters.

The Concert starts at 4:30 PM and at 5:30 PM there will be home-made Soups, Bread Rolls and Cake available in the Hall.

This is followed by a simple Evening Service.

Entry by donation.

For enquiries please contact Angelo Porcu (Youth Minister) on (02) 9550 – 4766

- Jeff Rankin

We are all pleased to hear that Society Member Jeff Rankin, was able to come out of the Hospital on Good Friday to attend a Family BBQ as Joan's son and family were in attendance during their visit from America.

Jeff is showing a lot more movement in his hands and is walking for short distances.

A TALE OF TWO LADIES

When I was eleven and in Year 6 at Carlton Public School, my father, a successful businessman, decided it was time "I learned the use of money". I am not sure whether he attributed his success in business to the fact that when he was growing up he had been a paper boy but that was the future he had mapped out for me and once my father made a decision that was that.

I was duly presented before Mr. Cooper of Cooper's News agency in Carlton Parade who, I suspect, had some reservations about the latest addition to his team of paper boys but he agreed to give me a go.

My run took me along Carlton Parade to Grey Street, up Grey Street to Ethel Street, along Ethel Street to Willison Road then back down Willison Road and Short Street to Carlton Parade. It was supposed to return me nine shillings a week less any uncollected debts.

In those days, there were two evening newspapers, The Sun and The Mirror, the Women's Weekly which appeared weekly and a host of women's magazines. While the nine shillings gave me a degree of financial independence, it was the powerful Thunderer whistle which was an essential piece of your equipage that was the real attraction of the job.

Among my customers was a somewhat confused, middle aged, grey haired lady who wore unfashionable long dresses and took a copy of almost every publication I carried. Unfortunately, she could never find her purse to pay for them. Despite my beloved Thunderer which I ceased to blow as soon as I turned into Grey Street and my efforts to get past No.26 before the owner appeared, my attempts at financial debt containment were to no avail as she was always sitting on her verandah, hiding behind the fly wire door or standing just inside the front gate waiting for me to appear. According to her neighbours she was a harmless old eccentric who wrote poetry and was a bit soft in the head.

The net result of all this was that by the time my uncollected debts were deducted from my nine shillings each Saturday, I was lucky if I was left with five shillings.

Years later, I won a scholarship to the Teachers' College where one of our compulsory subjects was Australian Literature. It was while I was there that I discovered the impecunious old lady whose reading matter I had subsidised during my time as a student at Carlton Public School was none other than Stella Miles Franklin, Australia's most outstanding woman novelist and a lady who enjoyed an international reputation for her writings.

There also lived in Carlton in the large two-storey terrace type house on the corner of High Street and Carlton Parade another remarkable old lady. Her name was Miss Nellie Battye.

She had worked as a receptionist for a group of doctors until she was 80 and had then donated her services to the City of Sydney Eisteddfod where she inscribed the various certificates in her immaculate copper plate writing. She had been a member of the Fourth Ward Progress Association for a number of years and at the age of 84 joined the Carlton-West Kogarah Branch of the Liberal Party where she filled the vital position of Whip in the Branch's debating team in the fiercely contested competition each year with other Liberal Party Branches in the area.

A pillar of the Carlton Methodist Church and a great supporter of the Wesley Mission, she fell down the stairs of her home on one occasion and broke her hip. When I visited her in Prince Alfred Hospital she was sitting up in bed reading the raunchy American novel "California" and declaring to any one who would listen that she was a fraud who should have been sent home, as there was nothing the matter with her.

One day I was telling her about my experiences with Miles Franklin whereupon she produced an early copy of "My Brilliant Career" the novel that first brought Miles Franklin fame signed Stella Miles Franklin and insisted that I keep it. It is still one of my most treasured possessions.

Ron Rathbone

Ron Rathbone Eulogy

They're not making any more Ron Rathbones. Ron Rathbone was unique and it is hard to hard to imagine what Rockdale would be like without him.

Rockdale has been extremely fortunate to have someone of the calibre of Ron Rathbone. Ron was a gifted man who used his talents for the greater good of the community.

For not only was Ron an extremely competent administrator he also loved history, especially local history.

He was very energetic and committed to the preservation of local history. He was instrumental in the foundation of the St George Historical Society and to the very end of his life assisted the society in many ways. Eg. he donated the proceeds of his most recent publication 'Cameos of Bexley' to the society.

As part of his role in Rockdale Council he tried to save historic buildings wherever possible. His most notable success was Dapeto (more widely known as Macquarie Lodge) in Wollongong Road, Arncliffe.

Ron Rathbone also worked strenuously to secure the purchase by Rockdale Council of Lydham Hall for use as a local museum.

He made the greatest contribution to recording the history of Rockdale. He wrote histories of many of the suburbs of Rockdale, including Bexley, Carlton, Arncliffe, Sans Souci, Brighton and Bardwell Valley.

Rathbone wrote history that was accessible. In other words they were not just a dry recitation of facts, but readable and made interesting for a wide audience. Ron was a master story teller who would include quirky and funny stories to make history not just interesting but downright entertaining. People flocked to his talks whenever he gave them.

He also made his history more interesting by including a lot of visual material. Over the years Ron collected a vast hoard of historical photographs which he collated and gave to Rockdale Library.

When we think today of Ron Rathbone we think of his legacy, the buildings saved, the history recorded, the establishment of Lydham Hall Museum and so on. But he also made provision for the future. When councillor's stipends were introduced Ron disagreed in principle with the idea – he thought a councillor's work should be entirely voluntary. He collected never what monies were due to him over the years and this kept on accumulating. However, as he approached the end of his life he had to decide what would be done with all this accumulated money. So, in the last year of his life he used these funds to establish the Ron Rathbone Local History prize to encourage the recording of local history for future generations.

As I listened to the various eulogies in memory of Ron I felt inspired, yet not diminished by his achievements. Ron showed us what could be achieved. But because in many ways he was an ordinary person it inspires us to follow his example rather than think to ourselves that it would be beyond us. We need only emulate his vision, courage and persistence and we, too, can achieve great things.

Bernard Sharah

Rockdale's Heritage Downgraded

Over the past few years I have become increasingly concerned about what appears to be a downgrading of heritage issues by Rockdale Council.

Since the election of the present council in 2004, Rockdale Council has taken an disappointingly negative approach to the preservation of places and buildings of historical or architectural significance.

The rather modest heritage grants that Council awarded to owners of heritage properties have been discontinued. These grants were instituted by Council some 15 years ago to encourage property owners to make improvements to heritage buildings which would be in keeping with their historical significance. It appears Council is no longer interested in encouraging owners to restore their heritage property, something which enhances the area generally.

Rockdale Council also decided to no longer employ a heritage adviser to assess and comment on applications affecting heritage properties. Council has certain responsibilities under the Heritage Act of NSW. It acts as custodian for many properties of heritage significance throughout the Rockdale area. Some of these are very significant and at least one site, Tempe House, is of national importance. Before Christmas last year Tempe House and the Magdalen Chapel were listed for sale. Who will buy these highly significant buildings and what use will they be put to?

How can Rockdale Council fulfil its role as custodian without the professional expertise of a heritage adviser? The short answer is that it cannot – unless it relies on external consultants with no specialised knowledge of the local area.

At the next meeting of the Society I intend putting these issues before members and suggest we become more active in voicing our opinion on these important issues. Whilst ever we are not defending places and buildings of historical importance in this area we are not fulfilling our charter.

Bernard Sharah

President

Source: Bernard Sharah

ANZAC DAY

Grandpa, What Did You Do In The War?

I'd been mowing the lawn and pulling some weeds, and slipped inside for a breather
I'd picked up the paper and turned on the news, not paying attention to either
When my grandson came in with a look on his face and a question that hit me full bore
An innocent question, no intention to hurt, "Grandpa, what did you do in the war?"

My skin went all creepy. I had sweat on my brow, my mind shot back fifty years
Two bullets that thudded whined all around, to terror, to nightmares, to tears
I was crawling through mud, I was shooting at men, tried to kill them before they killed me
Men who had wives and children at home, just like mine, just like my family.

"What did you do in the war?" he had asked, a question not meant to cause pain
But it brought back the horrors I'd left far behind, in a deep dark recess of my brain
I remembered the bombs being dropped from the planes, the explosions, the screams, and the loss
Of a friend – or an enemy – but a life just the same, replaced by a small wooden cross.

The visions attacked me of tramping through jungles, hot and stinking, with leaches and flies
Of orders that seemed to make no sense at all – of distrust, of suspicions, of lies
I've lived once again all those terrible storms, the dysentery, fever, the snakes
The blisters that lived with me month after month, all those blunders, and costly mistakes.

But how could I tell the boy all about that, T'would be better if he didn't know
It's a part of my life that I don't talk about from a good half a century ago
So I gulped, took a breath and tried to sound calm, and bid him to sit at my side
Then I opened my mouth to say a few words, but the tears welled up and I cried.

He cuddled to me with a look of concern, and I mumbled of feeling unwell
Then took hold of myself, blew hard on my nose, while I thought of some tales I could tell
"What did I do in the war," I began, then the stories began tumbling out
And they flowed with such ease I felt better again, and got over my pain and my doubt.

I told him of how I had made many friends, how I'd trained and gone overseas
Made of how seasick I had been on the way, almost dirtied myself when I sneezed
I told of the joy of the letters from home, of the hand knitted socks and the cake
That I got for my birthday but three weeks too late, 'cause it went somewhere else by mistake.

We talked about mateship, and what it had meant to trust someone else with your life
And of when I came home to my family again, to my kids, Mum and Dad, and my Wife
Of the crowd on the wharf, the bands, and the pomp, and the pride I felt in the parade
But I'm not ashamed that I hood-winked the boy, a decision that im glad that I made.

He can grow up without seeing fear in my eyes, or know of the terror I knew
For he'd not understand – and neither he should – all those memories that hit me are new
But maybe someday when he's older than now, I will tell him what war die to me
But with luck he won't ask me ever again, about wars that never should be.