

# St George Historical Society Bulletin

January - March 2016

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“Scarborough House”, pictured here c 1916 became “Primrose House” in 1936. Currently there is a move to sell this grand old house. The photograph is by Joseph Brokenshire, a local pharmacist.

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**Meetings are held on the third Saturday, of each month, commencing at 2pm.**

**Meetings are held at Sans Souci Library, cnr of Russell Av and Clareville Av Sans Souci  
(no meetings December and January)**

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**Next Meeting: 20th February, 2016  
at Sans Souci Library**

## **Guest Speakers Coming Up**

### **Saturday FEBRUARY 20th:**

Graham Wilcox from the Hawkesbury Historical Society on his book "Struggle for Unity. A Story of the Federation of Australia".

### **Saturday MARCH 19th:**

Brian Powyer will be speaking about the Female Factory at Parramatta and the struggle to save it from the development of North Parramatta precinct!

The St George Historical Society web site may be  
accessed at

<http://stgeorgehistsoc.org.au>

The St George Historical Society Facebook page may be  
seen at

St George Historical Society Inc

## News & Notes

🕒 **About Trove Again:** The next batch has now been published and indexed on line. We can now view the St George Call from 1904 to 1912 and from 1914 to 1923. With great support from this Society the current batch was online prior to Christmas 2105. The access to the St George Call on our home computers has been a great boon to research and as the project rolls on there will be more and more of this great material and information available not only to us but to scholars, students and researchers across Australia - no, across the world.

🕒 **New member Barry Johnson** has contributed a great article for this Bulletin. "Sharks in St George " makes for some interesting reading and is an unusual slant on local history - thanks Barry. Members are encouraged to follow their particular historical interests by contributing short articles for publication. Local St George area topics are particularly welcome.

🕒 **The proposed "Open Day" at Tempe House in February has been cancelled due to a lack of funding.**

🕒 **New Members are needed for the St George Historical Society. It has been suggested that ALL members make a special effort and turn up for the FEBRUARY meeting and BRING A FRIEND WITH THEM ! We should then have about 60 people at the meeting. Will you help your Society ?**

🕒 **Happy New Year to all connected with this society. If you so wish we can all make this the biggest and brightest year ever for the St George Historical Society. Come to meetings - contribute to your Bulletin - attend walks and talks. It really is up to you.**

🕒 **Good to see that popular member Robert McGarn is fit and well again after a leg problem. Robert is a great stalwart at Lydham Hall. He has a lot of extra time on his hands now having retired from work in mid-December 2015**

**St George Historical Society Resignation**

Firstly, Happy New Year to all our members. More importantly, I wanted to advise that I have decided to 'call it a day' after 27 years with the Society. Other commitments and pressures have



caused me to reduce my local involvements and responsibilities. Unfortunately, I have made this decision mid term so it will necessitate electing another president or possibly, Vice President stand in until the AGM in July. Even so I believe I leave the Society in very capable hands.

I joined in 1988, the Bicentennial Year, which was a high point for interest in Australian and local history. At that time many societies were formed and there was widespread awareness and concern for the need to protect buildings and places of historical interest.

The intervening years have seen huge changes to the local history scene. The most important of these has been the rise of the internet.

Social media, changes to heritage protection, decline in the popularity of community groups generally have all provided the Society with plenty of challenges.

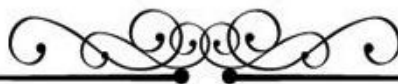
Despite some tough times the Society has survived and is now in its 54th year. Compelled to move our meetings from Rockdale Town Hall, we have since settled in our new home, Sans Souci Library. Seems to have attracted new members from the local area.

Much credit must go to the long term members who have supported the Society year in and year out. Without them we would not have survived. People such as Joan and Geoff Rankin, Gloria, Heinz and Richard Henke, Wesley and Joan Fairhall, Robert McGarn, Fred and Beverley Scott, Val and Noel Beehag (both sadly passed on), Alan Stahl, (late) Dora Lenane and Bettye Ross.

In more recent years people such as Laurice Bondfield (Hon. Secretary) and Garry Darby (Research Officer and Bulletin Editor) have injected enthusiasm and new life into the Society. Digitisation of the St George Call and of the Arthur Ellis photographic collection (ongoing) have been important achievements.

A big thank you to all members past and present for your support and friendship. I wish you all the very best.

**Bernard Sharah**



**SHARKS**

**IN ST.**

## GEORGE

by Barry Johnson

William Price is surmised to have been seized by a shark half a mile from shore in Botany Bay after his fishing boat capsized.

This was the news report on 22 June, 1903 after the 29 year old husband and father from Waverley had hired a boat with three friends the previous Saturday, sailing from Sans Souci into Towra Point. The boat was upturned by a squall, tossing the men into the water. On a cold winter afternoon, William, anxious after treading water with no sign of aid, began swimming back to the boat shed. His friends tried dissuading him but after 100 yards, he struggled as his saturated clothing began dragging him underwater. His friends saw his arms suddenly thrust upward as he attempted to remove the heavy clothing before drowning in the cold waves. Police retrieved William's body and his companions 90 minutes later. [1]

Within days, the coroner ruled William's death a drowning by asphyxia, dismissing reports of a shark attack. The fear evoked by a dangerous predator in the heart of St George waters has occurred throughout our history. As sentiment shifts from rational understanding of the very low probability of an attack toward panic and anger in the aftermath, a common response can be observed.

### FIRST FATALITY

The first reported fatality from a shark occurred in the Georges River at a picnic spot near Como on a Sunday afternoon in late January, 1906. William Dobson, a 33 year old ironmonger from Albany St, Petersham, died while swimming in the river at dusk. He fought against a large bull shark, managing to reach the shore before passing away shortly after. The news reports were particularly terrifying:

Dobson had no sooner dived in and had got about five yards out from the shore when his companions were startled by screams and cries of "Help." Running to the water's edge they saw a tremendous splashing, and through the spray witnessed Dobson striking furiously at something close against him. This they presently discovered to be a huge shark. The bather was making a gallant fight of it, and several times was drawn under water. Still he struggled gamely, and as the two men reached him he broke away from the monster and fell in a semi-conscious condition at their feet.

The fallen man was picked up and taken on to the bank, where a horrible sight met the gaze of his rescuers. The poor fellow survived but a few minutes after being drawn from the water." [2]

The Coroner ruled his death accidental. At the time, shark sightings were rare, especially at popular bathing beaches. People continued to enjoy these beaches throughout summer, apparently undeterred by this tragic accident.

"A SHARK HAS GOT ME. MY ARMS ARE GONE."

Community sentiment dramatically shifted in 1935 when, on New Years Day, two attacks occurred in the Georges River in the afternoon.

Richard Soden, 19, was killed while swimming near Moorebank. A witness, George



Markham, recalls the frightening moment when he first saw the shark: "He was about 10 yards in front of the others when suddenly I saw the black fin of a shark a few yards from him. Momentarily I was too terrified to shout. Then I cried out "Shark." At the same time, the shark, which was about 12 or 14 feet in length, turned over and it sped towards the boy. Its tail lashed the water. Then the water was tinged with blood." [3]

Only four hours later, Beryl Morrin, 13, of Birdwood Rd, Bankstown, was mauled while swimming with her brother. She managed to exit the water in dire condition. She survived, losing both arms in the attack. Beryl captured the public interest due to her young age, and optimistic attitude during her treatment in Bankstown hospital. Over \$180,000 (adjusted for inflation) was raised by local life- saving clubs, police, the local council and even a visiting Russian wrestler for a benefit fund during her recovery. Her notoriety was exploited for publicity with an offer of free tap dancing lessons from a local studio owner, "because all the work is done with the feet"[4]. She eventually returned to swimming, enjoying the Georges River again but from within an enclosure.

By the following evening, local fishermen had briefly caught the shark before it broke from their strongest hooks. A sudden spike in the mullet population in the river was believed to have drawn sharks further upriver. The encounters emptied the beaches of bathers during the summer, especially while the shark was free. A zoologist at the Powerhouse Museum (then the Sydney Technological Museum) reminded readers that swimmers can only remain safe in enclosures when entering coastal waters as sharks can manoeuvre in only two feet of water.

**"I PUNCHED THE SHARK TO TRY AND FRIGHTEN IT AWAY."**

Eleven years later, Valma Tegel, 14, of Russell St, Oatley Bay, was killed by an 11 foot blue pointer shark while swimming in three feet of water, also in the late afternoon. She died despite the attempt by her father to fend off the shark with punches and kicks. It was captured two months later, found with a wrist watch in its stomach. This fatality was also followed by a statement from an expert – a curator from the Sydney Museum, urging swimmers to use enclosures.

**"WE WERE SCARED STIFF."**

In 1949, on a late January afternoon, 3 youths received a large and unexpected catch in Kogarah Bay. Fishing for prawns and mullet with nets, they had snared an 8 foot whaler shark in waist-deep water, attacking it with oars and knives as it tore at their net.

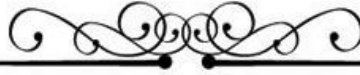
As the local community prioritises conservation and environmental protection, fishermen are much less likely to hunt and kill sharks. If caught, they are often released. While fishing for mullet, two men hooked a 300kg shovelnose shark near Como in 2010, but released it after taking the now obligatory 'selfie' photographs for social media.

The common elements of attacks are the courageous defence against the shark, demands for shark culls and a public advisory for swimmers to use enclosures. Partly due to this last advice, there have been no reported attacks to humans in St. George since 1946.

Notes: [1] 'Boating Accident At George's River.', The Sydney Morning Herald, 22 June 1903, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/14553025>, viewed 16 November 2015

[2] 'Struggle with a Shark.', The Sydney Morning Herald, 29 January 1906, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/14737404>, viewed 16 November 2015

[3] 'First Attack.', The Sydney Morning Herald, 1 January 1935, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/28022607>, viewed 16 November 2015 [4] 'Beryl Morrin.', The Sydney Morning Herald, 24 January 1935, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/17129073>, viewed 16 November 2015



### **ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEETING DATES 2016**

Our meetings are held on the third Saturday of each month except December and January.

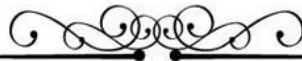
Meetings start at 2 p.m. Venue, Sans Souci Library, Clareville Avenue, Sans Souci

#### **SATURDAY:**

FEBRUARY 20TH  
MARCH 19TH  
APRIL 16TH  
MAY 21ST  
JUNE 18TH  
JULY 16TH (A.G.M.)  
AUGUST 20TH  
SEPTEMBER 17TH  
OCTOBER 15TH  
NOVEMBER 19TH

**DATES TO NOTE:** National Trust Heritage Festival from 16th April - 29th May.

Lydham Hall will open for extended hours on 2 days during  
N.T.Heritage Festival: Sunday 24th April, Sunday 22nd May.



### **MY MOTHER'S COOKBOOK: Part 1.**

**ELECTRICITY COMES TO ST GEORGE. AUSTRALIA'S  
FIRST WOMAN ELECTRICAL ENGINEER.**

**By Laurice Bondfield**

Several years ago near Christmas, I went looking for a recipe for Christmas cake. The recipes I'd tried from modern cookbooks had not turned out to taste as good as I remembered from childhood, so I went searching for older cookbooks using imperial measurements in their recipes. Stuck in the back of a drawer, battered, torn, with pages coming loose and yellowing I found my mother's electrical cookbook. Having found the fruitcake recipe in it no different to the ones I had not liked, I began to look through the pages, at first attracted by the old fashioned advertisements but then by the idea of the book itself, so I began to examine it more carefully.

The cardboard cover was printed in a red and pink checked pattern featuring the title and "Issued with the compliments of St George County Council" with the familiar logo of St George slaying the dragon, and the inside front cover told me that it had been issued by "St George County Council Electricity Supply Undertaking". A black and white photo showed twelve women in a cookery classroom, of which the text informed me that there were two- one at Kogarah, another at "Electricity House" Hurstville. The text also let me know that free cookery classes, "open to all St George residents" were held weekly and that they "also provide advisory services to women in their homes." The opposite page showed that it had been "compiled by Mrs F.V.McKenzie, Director of the Electrical Association for Women (Australia) 9 Clarence St, Sydney" that it was the third edition published in 1940. This gave me plenty of ideas to consider and mysteries to solve. Why did my mother need to take classes in electrical cookery? Who was Mrs. F.V.McKenzie and the Electrical Association for Women? How was this association connected to a cookbook issued by St George County Council?

The first question caused me to consider the way society copes with new technology. Today we press a switch and the light comes on, plug a kettle, a heater, an iron and any number of devices into a wall socket and think nothing of it. But I was reminded of a story by American humorist James Thurber about an eccentric aunt of his who was quite convinced that electricity was "leaking" into the air from the lights or wall sockets to the detriment of the health of the inhabitants of the room. We might laugh at her but we often think of dangers in the unfamiliar by analogy to something we do know, in her case obviously gas heating and lighting. Do you remember when microwave ovens first became common? Not only were new cookbooks written for novice users but there were all sorts of rumours about microwaves "leaking" out of badly sealed oven doors and causing harm to users among other dangers.

So not only would an authority (in this case, St. George County Council) want to accustom more people to using electricity, which they supplied, but to use it safely and to dispel any myths about its dangers. The book not only encouraged women to use electric stoves but published advertisements giving ideas about other appliances using electricity for lighting, heating, cleaning and washing in the home which could change the lives of housewives and, of course, to increase the use of electricity that St. George County Council provided (courtesy of the Commissioner for Railways from 1923 - 1952) (1). After all, women in 1930s were still using cement washing tubs, gas or wood burning coppers, clotheslines, clothes props and externally heated irons just to do the washing and ironing, let alone the other tasks which fell to their lot. As the notice on page 39 about other services available from the County Council points out "This is an electrical age, and most of the daily tasks of humanity can be done better by electricity than by any other method." St. George County Council gained a reputation in 1920s and 30s for the innovative ways it used to promote the use of electricity. For example, women demonstrators were sent from the Council to any furniture store which was having a promotion of electrical equipment, especially stoves. A photo from the book "St George County Council Electricity Supply Undertaking First Fifty Years 1920-1970" shows an early electric cooking demonstration at Diment's Store Hurstville. Another shows a "demonstration platform" which could obviously be moved from place to place as needed for cookery demonstrations. The slogan above the platform reads "Cook by electricity. Cool and Convenient. No Waste. No Fumes" Later, demonstration kitchens were opened in Kogarah and Hurstville headquarters as mentioned before. Other clues to making the housewife the "electrical expert" in the home come on page 31 "A Page for Menfolk" headed "Tell your menfolk about these risks!" on how to avoid accidents involving electricity. The page has three photos: one of a man on a ladder painting the guttering perilously close to the wires supplying electricity to the house, the second showing a man in a shed using a lathe plugged into a possibly faulty light fitting, the third has a man using a portable electric lamp to check under the house footings, warning that a faulty lamp socket or cord could cause the current to earth. Each photo has a dotted line showing the earthing effect of an electric current through the body in each case. Page 38 headed "Safety First" advises that all appliances and flexible cords should be kept in perfect order accompanied by two photos. One of a boy ("Neville Musto kindly posed for this picture") about to touch the electric wires exposed by a frayed cord on an iron, another of a boy about to climb up to a shed roof to retrieve a kite hanging dangerously from the electric wires. There are other pages devoted to explaining safety in the kitchen - including an electric hairdryer! - and the safe use of an upright vacuum cleaner.



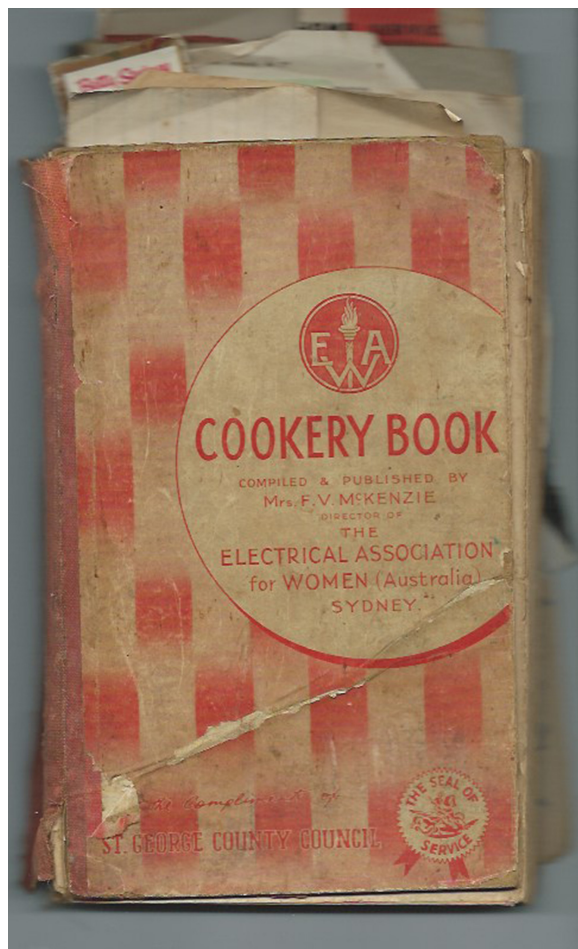
Last of all, with an eye to future users and their preservation is a children's page which explains about the "tiny electric imps sent out from the power station, along the copper wires you can see high up on poles in the street" how to avoid the electrocution of your pet cat, why birds are safe sitting on wires and why you must never go near fallen power lines. This was published in the "School Magazine" (which many of you may remember getting free each month in primary school) several times over the years. It was written by F.V. McKenzie, who invited her readers to write to her "if you want to know more about the Electric Imps" which brings me to my next question: who was Mrs F.V. McKenzie?

The search for an answer to this question at the beginning of my research sent me to the Dictionary of National Biography- nothing. My question went unanswered for a few years until an article in the "Sydney Morning Herald" in April 2012 put me on the track. This year serendipity came to my aid! After showing the cookbook at a "Show and Tell" session of the Society the RAHS e-newsletter appeared in my inbox. In it was an advertisement for a talk at Benledi House, Glebe on "The Electric Violet McKenzie" by Catherine Freyne of the Dictionary of Sydney!(2) This filled in a lot of the gaps in knowledge. Catherine Freyne and Lisa Murray have researched Violet McKenzie's life and Catherine Freyne has published a detailed biography on the Dictionary of Sydney website, along with an entry in the Dictionary of National Biography. Research into her life is ongoing.

Violet McKenzie (nee Wallace) was born in 1890 in Melbourne. Her family moved to Austinmer on N.S.W south coast when she was small. By her own account she was always interested in bells, buzzers and lights as a child and successfully set up an automatic light in one of the dark household cupboards. After completing primary school she won a bursary to study at Sydney Girls High School. In 1915 she studied science at Sydney University, then approached Sydney Technical College to study electrical engineering. In an oral history recorded in 1979 she recounted her reception! She was told students were apprenticed to a firm, so showing the enterprising spirit she maintained through her life, she had some cards printed with her name as an electrical engineer, found an advertisement in a newspaper requiring someone to install electricity to a house "way beyond Marrickville, a mile from the end of the tramline." Could it have been in our district? She presented her business card and the contract at the College and was accepted as a student. She graduated in 1923.

For many years she ran a successful radio shop in the Royal Arcade in Sydney, becoming the only woman member of the Wireless Institute of Australia. Early radios were not easy to use, and enthusiasts like Violet were often radio hams as well, learning Morse Code to send signals. By 1932 she had set up the "Women's Radio College" on Phillip St. Sydney where she provided training in Morse Code and how to build and set up radio receivers. In 1924, she had married Cecil McKenzie a young electrical engineer employed by Sydney County Council. It was this connection which, in my opinion, later led to Violet creating the "Electrical Association of Women". To see why she did, we have to look at the different ways that St. George and Sydney County Councils were set up to supply electricity to their customers.

The St George County Council, the first of its kind, was set up in 1920 when Bexley, Hurstville, Kogarah and Rockdale Councils were faced with increased charges for the supply of gas, particularly for street lighting, just at the time the Illawarra Railway was being electrified. The



St. George District was becoming increasingly suburban. Small farms were being sold to developers for new estates, houses were being built near the railway stations for the new "commuter class" like my grandfather, Ernest Bondfield, who lived in Grey St Allawah with his young family and took the train to the city to his job at the Lands Title Office, even before electrification. Thus St George County Council was in the enviable position of having very little existing gas supply infrastructure, lots of customers keen to live in "modern" homes and a readily available source of electric power, that could be sold at low cost. The original St. George scheme had been to erect distributors to supply 2,000 consumers in 5 years but within 12 months mains had been erected to serve over 10,000. In contrast, Sydney County Council faced a city which had built gas pipes and generators in the early twentieth century to supply heating and lighting to both residential and commercial premises. Moreover SCC had to build their own electric power stations, like White Bay, which increased the initial cost of setting up a reliable supply. Potential customers in Sydney already had gas heating, lighting and stoves which worked perfectly well- why would they change? The best way to increase residential electricity demand was to increase the use of electricity for heating, lighting and cooking. Both Councils had had to obtain loans to begin initial construction of a network and they were keen to repay them. In 1922, the City Electrical Engineer, H.R. Forbes complained of "thousands" of consumers whose annual consumption amounted to 70 - 140 Kwh whose only use of electricity might be for a radio or gramophone, perhaps a reading lamp.<sup>(3)</sup> So any way that householders could be persuaded to use more electrical appliances was to be encouraged.



In 1934, Violet McKenzie, set up the Electrical Association of Women in King St, City. Photos from the time show a room that was part electrical demonstration showroom set up by Sydney County Council part club room. Violet McKenzie was keen to educate women about the generation and use of electricity - the club room had a poster diagram of an electricity generating power station as its only art work! Any woman who was interested in buying anything from an electric jug to a stove could come in and learn how to use it free of charge. In 1936 she published the EAW Cookery Book, which ran into seven editions and remained in print till 1954. Obviously at some stage St. George County Council had obtained permission to publish an edition for use in its cookery schools with its own cover, the 1940 edition of which was my mothers cookbook. You can see how the innovations pioneered in St George were adapted to suit Sydney County Council's different circumstances.

Violet McKenzie went on to have a distinguished career. In 1939, she founded W.E.S.C. (Women's Emergency Signalling Corps) to train women in Morse Code to replace the male telegraphists in the Post Office who would be called up for military service when war broke out. By the time war was declared she had trained 120 women. She was instrumental in persuading the RAN brass to set up the WRANS by proving to them that women could use radios just as well as men. Throughout the war she trained men and women in the Army, RAAF and merchant navy operators including contingents from other allies such as India and USA. No government grant or allocation of accommodation was ever given to her, the WESC instructors paying 1/- per week towards the rent of the premises housing the school. By war's end she had trained over 3,000 women, one third of whom joined the services, others remained at Clarence St as instructors. The only official recognition she ever received during wartime was to be made an honorary Flight Officer in the WAAF so she could legitimately train Air Force personnel. After the war she continued to train men for the merchant navy, commercial pilots and anyone who needed a "signallers' ticket". Many of them spoke affectionately of learning with "Mrs. Mac." In 1950 she was awarded an OBE for her wartime service. She died in 1982.

This brings me to the final question- Why did my mother need to learn to cook on an electric stove? Well, in 1939, she and my grandparents moved to a rented property in Arncliffe. I suspect the house had an electric stove, which she hadn't used before, and probably attended cooking classes at one of the St. George County Council kitchens, purchasing or being given the 1940 edition of book after finishing the course.

So, so far I have found answers to some of my questions, only to raise others. Who were the "lady demonstrators" employed by the St George County Council, especially the "Home Service Supervisor, Mrs Gardiner"? There also seem to have been quite a number of women clerks/ typists employed in the Council offices - remarked on in passing in one of the two histories of the Council but their experiences never detailed. If anyone knows of any information about them, especially in the period 1920 - 1940, I would love to find out more!

Finally, a foreword in the EAW Cookbook by Dr. Frances McKay, led me to search in a different direction again - but that is the subject of another article - Part 2!

★

#### Notes and References

1. St George County Council Electricity Supply Undertaking: The First 50 Years 1920-1970.
2. Dictionary of Sydney. [home.dictionarofsydney.org/person/mckenzie\\_violet](http://home.dictionarofsydney.org/person/mckenzie_violet).
3. Electrifying Sydney: 100 Years of Energy Australia by George Wilkenfield and Peter Spearitt. Sydney 2004. Available online.
4. St George County Council: 12 Years of Progress 1920- 1932.

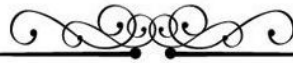
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**STOP PRESS**

**Lydham Hall is temporarily closed to all visitors while awaiting essential repairs to the roof and kitchen. More news soon.**

Contributions to this bulletin, articles, photographs, news, notes, diary dates, reviews etc., are always welcome - please contact the editor,  
Garry Darby, 9583 9916 [garry@garrydarby.com](mailto:garry@garrydarby.com)

*Please come along to our meetings and enjoy the history presented by*



## Free Local History Lectures

\*

Kogarah Council has sponsored the "Life Festival" and as part of that, St.G HS member and author

**Dr Garry Darby**

will present 3 FREE lectures at Kogarah Library

1. Thursday 14th April - 10.30am - "The Sans Souci Waterfront 1895-1965"
2. Wednesday 20th April - 10.30am - "Rocky Point Road - The First 50 Years"
3. Friday 22nd April - 10.30am - "Primrose House" & "Aqua Flora Park"

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*St George Call, February,  
12, 1916 - This was located  
on 'TROVE'.*

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