



North Sydney

Heritage Leaflet 2

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMES TO THE NORTH SHORE

Local government was slow to take hold in New South Wales. The City of Sydney contained one quarter of the population of New South Wales when it was incorporated in 1842.

As the population of city and country boomed in the wake of the discovery of gold in the 1850s, the Municipalities Act of 1858 was passed and residents were given the right to petition the Government of the day for incorporation of their town and city. However the power and reach of the central colonial government remained strong and this, combined with the isolation of settlements, hindered the development of local government. Much of the colony was still without this form of representation well into the 1870s.

The first suburb of Sydney to incorporate was Randwick in November 1858. The lower North Shore, too, was considering the advantages of local government. The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 5 August 1858 reported that 'influential inhabitants were making an energetic and praiseworthy effort' towards their incorporation as a municipality. One of these was Sir William Burton, member of the Legislative Council and former Supreme Court Judge.

The township of St Leonards (the present day CBD) had been gazetted and planned as a grid pattern of streets in 1838. There was considerable expectation that the settlement would some day rival that on the southern side of the harbour. However the lower North Shore was still sparsely populated with only 464 residents recorded in the 1856 census. Many of these were concentrated around the waterfront.

While some were keen to improve local amenities and secure the financial support of the colonial government that followed incorporation, others were reluctant to pay rates on their substantial land holdings. Alexander Berry, for instance, owned an estate of several hundred acres around present day Wollstonecraft, Waverton and Crows Nest. He opposed Burton's attempts to establish a municipality for St Leonards that would include his property. The sale of allotments on Berry's estate and other large holdings in the early 1850s prompted the *Illustrated Sydney News* of 2 September 1854 to declare, somewhat prematurely, that this was 'no little Sydney but a North Sydney, a rival to the southern city'.

However it was East St Leonards, spreading from the edge of the 'township' down to Milsons Point and across to Cremorne, that was first proclaimed a municipality in 1860. Controversy surrounding the validity of the addresses of some of those who petitioned for the creation of the municipality meant that the first council was not actually elected until 1868. Alderman Tucker was the first Mayor. He was joined on Council by other prominent local landowners including James Milson, Francis Lord and Thomas Loxton.

In 1867 Sir William Burton's dream of local government for St Leonards was finally realised. William Tunks was elected as the first Mayor of the sprawling and sparsely settled municipality stretching from Berry Island in the west to Mosman in the east.

In 1871 the Borough of Victoria, which took in the densely populated areas around Blues Point Rd and Lavender Bay, separated from St Leonards to become a distinct municipality. Alderman Matthew Charlton was elected Mayor. Town clerk and local shopkeeper, George Willington, made his substantial London Store in Blues Point Road available for meetings.

The population of the lower North Shore grew rapidly from the 1870s to the 1890s as improved ferry services made the area accessible to the city of Sydney. The Councils tended to be dominated by prominent local men as voting was restricted to ratepayers and landowners. In 1880 less than half of residents of St Leonards were eligible to vote.

The three councils addressed issues such as road building, sanitation and waterfront facilities. Plans were made for the erection of public buildings. Throughout the 1880s amalgamation became more attractive. In May 1882 the local correspondent for the *Freeman's Journal* was blunt in his assessment:

the advantages of having one large powerful corporation instead of three petty ones... are so obvious that it is almost insulting the intelligence of any person of average common sense to argue the matter.

There was mutual advantage as Victoria and East St Leonards had incurred considerable debts that could be offset by cost sharing and consolidated revenue. St Leonards, with little debt and a rapidly growing population, could take advantage of the expensive infrastructure already established near the waterfront.

A majority of Councillors voted for amalgamation and the municipality of North Sydney was formed on 31 July 1890. The name harked back to predictions of civic greatness carried by the *Illustrated Sydney News* in 1854 when the population was less than 500 residents. The new Council was responsible for 18,000 residents living in 3,200 houses.

The first official Council meeting took place at the Masonic Hall on Walker Street on 8 August 1890. Alderman Francis Punch was elected Mayor. Subsequent meetings took place in the former East St Leonards Town Hall in Alfred St, the only purpose built town hall ever constructed in the area. In 1926 North Sydney Council moved into a converted doctor's residence on Miller Street. Attempts to build a high-rise civic centre there in the 1970s were defeated and the modest Chambers now line one side of a civic park.

In 1893 Mossman Ward separated from North Sydney Council and became the Municipality of Mosman. North Sydney then had five wards; Belmore, Kirribilli, Tunks, Victoria and Warringa. Today the wards are Cremorne, Tunks, Victoria and Wollstonecraft. 25 community precincts range across these wards providing forums for residents'

SIGNIFICANT DATES

- 1838 Township of St Leonards gazetted
- 1842 City of Sydney incorporated
- 1860 East St Leonards municipality formed
- 1867 St Leonards Municipality formed
- 1871 Victoria Municipality formed
- 1890 East St Leonards, St Leonards and Victoria amalgamate to form the Municipality of North Sydney
- 1893 Mosman separates from North Sydney to become separate Municipality
- 1994 New Local Government Act, reorganization of Council from five wards to four, reduction of alderman from 15 to 12

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