



North Sydney

# Heritage Leaflet 12

## SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE

**Henry Lawson had lived around the northern foreshores for more than 20 years when he was moved to lament the 'shifting of old North Sydney'. The area was undergoing a boom. Between 1905 and 1911 the population grew from 23 140 to 34 646. Another 14 000 people moved in by 1921. The community that Lawson knew was being displaced by a 'brand new crowd' that thronged down to the ferries on their way to and from work.**

Lawson died in 1922, just before the Sydney Harbour Bridge Act was passed in response to the growing demand for a fixed harbour crossing. The 'shift' that he witnessed could be eclipsed by the changes that took place during and after the construction of what was commonly called 'North Shore Bridge'.

As early as 1838 North Shore residents wanted a fixed harbour crossing to link them to town. In that year the 'proprietors' of the North and South Shore Bridge Company promised to improve property values and communication 'beyond all calculations' with a punt. While the North Shore remained sparsely populated, the cost and difficulty of such a project was too great.

However the desire to span the harbour, whether by bridge or tunnel, remained alive through the 1800s. Despite the negative findings of the 1891 Royal Commission on City and Suburban Railways, North Sydney Council joined with others in the north to further the idea. Citizens were also agitating. In 1908, Hugh Duff of the Sydney and North Shore Bridge League declared that the 'North Shore is growing leaps and bounds. Nothing can keep it back'. A bridge was becoming inevitable.

Meanwhile ferries had transformed the foreshores. As Duff spoke there was a ferry passing in or out of Circular Quay every 48 seconds. Most served the North Shore where Milsons Point was the busiest wharf. In 1912 the pro-bridge Council dismissed them as 'primitive method of carriage'. Ferry traffic peaked in 1927 but by then the Bridge was begun. When it opened in 1932, ferry use was halved.

After years of frustrated advocacy, the Bridge enthusiasts at North Sydney found a persistent and persuasive ally in JCC Bradfield, Principal Designing Engineer in the NSW Department of Public Works. A one-time resident of North Sydney, Bradfield moved to Normanhurst and was well aware of the frustrations of travel across the Harbour. From 1912 the Bridge became central to his plans for a greater Sydney transport network.

In 1920 a deputation from the North Shore secured a promise from the NSW Premier Storey to proceed. The Sydney harbour Bridge Act was passed in 1922 and Public Works commenced work on the northern approaches in 1923. Dorman Long and Co won the contract to build the Bridge. They based their steel fabrication at Milsons Point where the cliff face was blasted to fit the huge workshops.

North Sydney Council was quick to lobby for the employment of local men. Molly Nichols' Uncle Charlie got to work in the steel shops: "*as children we used to think he was on [the Bridge] and we waved to him when we went to town*". Like many others Charlie lost his job when work finished in 1932. Amidst the Depression, 'he went away looking for gold'. Up to 1400 people worked on the Bridge. Sixteen men died, six of them in North Sydney.

Up to 500 homes and businesses in Milsons Point, Kirribilli and North Sydney were demolished to build the Bridge's approaches and pylons, and the rail line from the new North Sydney station to Waverton. Some, like 'Brisbane House' and 'Grantham', were grand longstanding homes. Most were modest terraces and shops along Blues, Alfred, Campbell, Fitzroy and Junction Streets.

The resumptions began during a state-wide housing shortage and ended on the eve of the Great Depression. There was no scheme for rehousing. On top of these hardships, tenants received nothing for the loss of businesses or homes. Council protested their 'unjust' treatment while tenants themselves wrote letters pleading for

help. Neither the conservative Nationalist government, nor the Labor administration that followed, acted. In the end 'removal expenses' were paid to persuade tenants to quit'.

The economic downturn around vibrant Alfred Street took effect before the Bridge opened. After the diversion of traffic up the new Pacific Highway to Crows Nest in 1932, Alderman EM Clark admitted that the once thriving business centre of North Sydney is 'practically deserted'.

The construction of the Bridge was likened to the building of the Pyramids and the Panama Canal. Its opening on the 19<sup>th</sup> March 1932 was a huge affair involving official and locally organised events which ran for nearly three weeks.

Despite the traumas of the resumptions and the hardship of the Depression, North Sydney residents and businesses organised a week of celebrations. Twelve-year-old Jean Smith was among thousands who crowded along Blue, Miller, Mount and Walker Streets to view the opening day pageant and float parade as it left the Bridge and returned south. Her brothers *"hitched a ride in a Cobb and Co Coach...[and] went over in that"*. Rosemary Lumsdaine watched from the top of Mount Street Convent School; *'we were rather a long way away and we were all grabbing the binoculars. It was hard to see anything very clear'*. Members of the Raymond Club at Neutral Bay could view the night illuminations 'in comfort' for 5 shillings admission. Hobsons Limited in Miller Street offered 'Bridge Week' discounts on furniture. Their advertisement cheerfully suggested that the Bridge was built to 'Bring Customers to Hobsons'. In reality, the new Pacific Highway took shoppers on to Crows Nest. Business would not return until the 1960s.

### **'a super-highway will be required'\***

#### **After the Bridge**

JJC Bradfield's original plans for a bridge and transport network included grand civic buildings, thoroughfares and gardens for North Sydney. Little was realised beyond the landscaping of resumptions sites along Alfred Street. This became Bradfield Park.

The Bridge changed North Sydney from a vital transport hub into a corridor through which people passed on their way to and from the city. Upon opening in 1932, its six-lane road was named the Bradfield Highway. It was a fitting dedication for, by then, Bradfield was envisioning a 'super-highway' north instead of the rail link to Mosman and the northern beaches he had proposed in the 1920s. The Bridge's rail link from the city to Hornsby remained vital but by 1959 private vehicle use had eclipsed public transport crossings and the Bridge's tram tracks and station were removed.

The Warringah Expressway was begun in 1960 and local residents were again faced with demolition and upheaval. North Sydney was cut in two upon its completion in 1968. The Sydney Harbour Tunnel was opened in 1992 and the Bridge's northern pylons came to house its vehicle emission vents. The tunnel realised both earlier plans for a subterranean link and Bradfield's predictions of a second crossing.

\*JJC Bradfield, 'Sydney of 1950 and later', *Sydney Bridge Celebrations*, 1932.

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