



North Sydney

Heritage Leaflet 30

NORTH SYDNEY OVAL

The No 1 'North Sydney Oval', within St Leonards Park, has been used for organised sport since the 1870s. The Park itself was set aside as a 'reserve' for public recreation from as early as 1838, although it was not gazetted until 1891. The first pavilion on the southwestern side probably dates to 1879. It was subsequently demolished and replaced by another on the same site in 1896. A local Rugby Union football club called 'The Pirates' evolved into the first North Sydney Rugby Club within the district system in 1900. No 1 Oval was the venue for their matches but it is likely 'The Pirates' had been playing on the site for several years before that time.

Crowds increased so that, by 1912, the need for a new pavilion was being considered. However, it was until after World War One that Council called for a competition for a sporting pavilion to seat at least 1000 people. The architect Mr F G Allen won in 1924. The total cost of the pavilion was substantial at around £11,000 but it resulted in 'the largest suburban Grand-Stand in the State' with a maximum crowd capacity of 1,250. The building was opened in 1929 by the Premier, Mr Bavin, and Mayor Primrose. The increased use put pressure on the ground's curators and in 1931 the cricket pitch was compared to 'concrete'. Work was done to improve this in following years.

The Oval, itself, had been enclosed by a timber fence in 1909. This was later replaced by a high brick wall that resulted in the loss of some of the original Moreton Bay Fig Trees, much to the dismay of many local residents. One survivor inside the perimeter is protected by Council's management plan for the Oval and St Leonards Park and is also heritage listed. This also includes the avenue of Figs outside the Oval grounds.

During the 1920/30s refurbishment the scoreboard, kiosk, gates and turnstiles and toilet facilities were constructed. Concrete terraced seating on the western side of the Oval was extended to the south in the late 1930s and the capacity of the ground increased to around 19,000. At this time players were given direct access between the dressing room and the Oval to 'protect [them] from unruly spectators whilst entering and leaving the playing area... at various times after an exciting match players have been struck or interfered with by spectators'.

Clubs and Teams

The North Sydney District Rugby League Club, later known as the Bears, was formed in 1908 and dominated the Premierships in the early 1920s. Duncan Thompson (for whom the grandstand is named) played with the 1920 team and along with Cec Blinkhorn, Harold Horder and Herman Peters.

Many famous cricketers have played at North Sydney Oval and for the North Sydney Club. Bill O'Reilly, Charles Macartney, Mollie Dive (Captain of the Australian Women's Cricket Team in the 1930s) and Doug Walters are commemorated in the names of some stands. Don Bradman lived at McMahons Point during the Bodyline Series in 1932 and also played for the North Sydney District Cricket Club. In January 1988, Bradman and 23 other 'living legends' met at North Sydney Oval as guests of honour at the Bicentennial Test Ball. The group included Harold Larwood, Bill O'Reilly and Richie Benaud.

While cricket and Rugby League dominated use of the grounds through the 20th century, Rugby Union, Australian Rules Football, soccer, lacrosse, cycling and athletics have also been represented. A 1930 proposal for a dirt track for motor cycle races at No 1 Oval was, however, refused 'after careful consideration'.

Redevelopment in the 1980s

There were few improvements after the 1930s. When Ted Mack became Mayor in 1980 he quickly turned his attention to the urgent need for the refurbishment of the Oval. A community consultation process with all of the users of the Oval and the Park was established in 1982. It was decided to develop the site as an income-producing property for North Sydney Council. Architect Feiko Bouman was contracted to design the 'new look' Oval. He aimed to retain the 'village green' atmosphere of the space but incorporated new steel technology with a

historic flavour. Bouman's design for the Oval was also innovative in that the new stand, named in honour of Mollie Dive, incorporated a childcare center on the ground level, a function centre. The stands fronting Miller Street were fitted out with shop fronts and office space. In tandem with this new construction, the project involved the relocation the Bob Stand from the Sydney Cricket Ground [SCG]. That pavilion had been marked for demolition in the early 1980s as part of the SCG refurbishment. Ted Mack, who had watched test cricket from the Stand since 1946, negotiated its removal to North Sydney. The relocation was funded by Council and the North Sydney Leagues Club with additional grants from State and Federal Governments. The Bob Stand was dismantled by Miller Milston & Ferris (Engineers) Pty Ltd. Each element of the Stand was tagged and marked for re-erection in North Sydney. Feiko Bouman added roof turrets to the original roof structure to give it a 'Victorian' look. The Oval was reopened in 1987.

Within the Oval

Duncan Thompson Stand: Named for a cricketer who played with North Sydney and was in the team that won the City Cup in 1920. This is the 1929 pavilion also known as the grand stand which opened to much fanfare and acclaim for its modernity and facilities at that time.

Bill O'Reilly Stand: Named in honour of the Test cricketer and sporting journalist. This stand was designed to accommodate shop fronts and a colonnade along Miller Street.

The Macartney Stand: Charlie Macartney was a local cricketer who played for Australia in the late 1920s. This stand was designed with added height to ensure crowds could see over the existing ramped seating in front of it. The spaces inside and fronting Miller Street were let as office space and housed the Billy Blue School until 2005.

Doug Walters Hill (previously known as 'the hill'): Named after former test cricket, Doug Walters who also played for the local team.

The Bob Stand: Dismantled and transported to North Sydney Oval in 1983, the name is derived from the cost of the entrance to the SCG during the Depression.

Mollie Dive Stand: As well as Captaining of the Australian Women's Cricket Team, Mollie Dive also played hockey, squash and golf. This stand was the showpiece of the 1980s redevelopment project and features a function centre and a kindergarten on the ground floor fronting Fig Tree Lane.



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