‘We will see a town rising’: 
a history of North Sydney

A talk given to mark the 125th Anniversary of the establishment of North Sydney Council in 1890 for the North Shore Historical Society. (This version has been slightly edited for publication. Not all the images shown on 11 June have been included for reasons of copyright).

Dr Ian Hoskins, North Sydney Council Historian, 11 June 2015

I’d like to begin by acknowledging the Cammeraygal people, the original owners of this place. And thank you to the Historical Society for inviting me to give this talk tonight. It is a privilege as the Society has done so much for local history in this area – a story you will hear more about later. I’d also like to welcome those of our local history volunteers in the audience. We couldn’t do without the people who staff our museums and help us in the Heritage Centre organising files and indexing archives. And welcome to the Willoughby Bay Precinct who have come out en masse tonight – thank you.

North Sydney has far more shoreline than arbitrary land boundary. This place was, then, largely defined by natural forces over millennia. Between 10,000 and 6,000 years ago melting glaciers flooded a river valley to create the main channel of Sydney Harbour. In doing so, ridges from Cremorne to Balls Head were turned into headlands. A peak just further to the west became Berry Island. The valley of another river to the north was inundated to create Middle Harbour and two bays within that: Long and Willoughby. The water did not rise high enough to fill the deep gully carved by Flat Rock Creek. That little waterway still drains into Long Bay and, with its valley, forms a convenient northern boundary for today’s Council area.

![The second largest Suspension Bridge in the World—N. Sydney, N.S.W.](image)

Figure 1. Suspension Bridge over Flat Rock Creek from postcard. c.1900. North Sydney Heritage Centre / Stanton Library collection
It is in that part of world, Cammeray, that archaeological investigation has revealed a site of human occupation of around 6,000 years old.\footnote{Val Attenbrow, \textit{Sydney's Aboriginal Past: investigating the archaeological and historical records}, UNSW Press, 2003, p.67} We know, therefore, that the place North Sydney has been a cultural landscape for as long as it has existed. That should hardly be surprising. Human sites down the coast have been dated back to 20,000 years – when the sea was several kilometres to the east.

The idea of a shifting coastline raises the question of the origin of the people who came to call the Harbour their home. Were they always coast dwellers pushed back by the advancing sea or were they river people who adapted over thousands of years to the creation of the marine and estuarine environment that is Sydney Harbour? What accommodations were made as people moved across the land? With so many sites now underwater, tarmac or concrete, it is not clear whether archaeology can answer these questions with any degree of certainty.

What is clear is that for thousands of years they were eating seafood – there the archaeological evidence is unequivocal. And, for hundreds of years at least, they were carving images of marine creatures in the soft rock that surrounded their waterway and created perfect platforms for art. Surviving petrolyths at Balls Head and Berry Island are evidence of that.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Aboriginal_petrolyth/engraving_at_Balls_Head,_photographed_c.1900._SLNSW}
\caption{Aboriginal petrolyth/engraving at Balls Head, photographed c.1900. SLNSW}
\end{figure}

Historical records tell us that by 230 years ago the people who lived in this part of the Harbour – North Sydney – called themselves Cammeraygal, or Gammeraigal. Their territory extended from Cremorne in the east to Woodford Bay in the west and north to an uncertain point. The Harbour was their southern boundary. It provided most of their food and probably significant spiritual meaning. It existed as a watery highway along which they might encounter other clans and paddle to other territories. The Harbour it seems was neutral space.
The Cammeraygal were just one of at least seven groups around the Harbour. Each consisted of about 100 to 150 people who traversed the land, not as transient nomads with no sense of place, but as people who knew their territories intimately, exploiting different sites for what they provided as these were needed – rock shelters, fishing spots, bark for huts and the canoes they called Nawi, honey from the small stingless bees, nectar from flowers, flour and weaving rush from the grass called Lomandra and so forth.

Figure 3. The title of this 1824 French engraving translates as ‘New-Holland: New South Wales: Caves, with natives hunting and fishing in Port Jackson’. It is based upon a drawing by CA Lesueur of 1802. National Library of Australia

It has been suggested recently that the name may have related to their social place in the broader Harbour community. Cammeraygal could derive from ‘Gommera’ – a word for one who knew law, who presided over ritual. It was the understanding of David Collins, the first fleet naval officer and assiduous journal keeper who lived by the Harbour from 1788 until 1796, that Cammeraygal men played an important part in ceremonies involving all the Harbour clans. In 1795 he attended an initiation ceremony involving dozens of men and boys at a prepared site, a Yoolong, on a southside cove – called Woggan-ma-gule by the Aboriginal people, Farm Cove by the colonists and known as the Royal Botanic Gardens today. ‘It was not until the 2nd of February that the party was complete. In the evening of that day the people from Cammeray

---

2 Michael Powerll and Rex Hesline, ‘Making Tribes? Constructing Aboriginal tribal entities in Sydney and coastal NSW from the early colonial period to the present’, Royal Australian Historical Society Journal, Vol. 96, Pt 2, December, 2010, pp.115-148. Note, however, that the authors make the connection between Gommera and Gammeraygal in the context of questioning the application of the term Gammeraygal for a distinct ‘tribal’ entity.
arrived, among whom were those who were to perform the operation [tooth avulsion], all of whom appeared to have been impatiently expected by the other natives'.

Figure 4. ‘Yoolong Erab-ba-diang’, part of the ceremony at Woggan-ma-gule in 1795, from David Collins, An Account of the English Colony of New South Wales, State Library of South Australia

Collins’ description, and the many illustrations that accompanied it in his published account of foundation of NSW, give an insight into a complex Harbour society which was still enacting culture seven years after that world had been transformed by the arrival of Collins and several thousand other Europeans in Sydney Cove – Warrane - since 1788.

Impressive as the Cammeraygal no doubt were, and as splendid as their isolation on the north side of the Harbour may have been, these did not forestall their dispossession. They were divested of their land just as the Gadigal and Wangal on the south side lost territory as the settlement spread out from Sydney Cove and the forest cleared in an ever widening arc. Unbeknown to them, and indeed all the first coastal people, their land had been acquired by the dubious right of first discovery on behalf of the British King George III by James Cook in 1770.

One of the justifications later provided for that takeover was the apparent absence of agriculture and architecture. These two things connoted in the collective European mind, right of tenure.

---

In 1794, the year before the remarkable initiation ceremony that Collins recorded, the first European habitation was erected on Cammeraygal land – directly opposite the already sprawling town on the southern shore. Thirty acres were granted to an emancipated convict called Samuel Lightfoot – part of that grand experiment in penology that was the founding of Sydney. The aim was to give land to one time felons so they may never return to Britain. In the case of Lightfoot this failed. He returned to England without ever residing on his ‘farm’. But once alienated, that 30 acres – covering Milsons Point and Kirribilli - entered the nascent property market that existed in the infant colony. And so it was passed on to another called Robert Ryan and then to James Milson who disputed its ownership with the free merchant Robert Campbell. And so on and so forth.

Figure 5. ‘The North view of Sydney Cove taken from the end of Pitts Row’, from David Collins, An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, State Library of South Australia

Figure 6. Detail from previous engraving showing Lightfoot's dwelling
Five hundred and twenty four acres to the west and north of present-day North Sydney went to the merchant and magistrate Edward Wollstonecraft in 1821. Already the peninsular that the Cammeraygal had known as Warrungureah had been given to the convict-turned-waterman, Billy Blue. In that year too, 1817, most of present-day Neutral Bay was bought by the richest man in the port town, John Piper, as a present for his son-in-law Alfred Thrupp. Like Lightfoot before him, Thrupp found the north shore less than enticing. He never resided on his vast estate and possibly voided full title to it; for it was gobbled up by merchant Daniel Cooper in the sell-off that occurred when Piper went bankrupt in the late 1820s. Somewhat misleadingly the name Thrupp lives on in maps and street signs – immortalising a man with little connection to the place. However, when one delves into the Rate and Valuation Books in Council’s archive there are street listing after street listing that show the Cooper family as land owners right down to the 20th century, when brick bungalows and villas were sprouting up on leased land where once there were fern gullies and streams.

Lightfoot’s tiny habitation was probably slab-built, or made of wattle and daub in the manner of other convict huts around the Rocks – an example therefore of early modest vernacular architecture. Edward Wollstonecraft’s house is the oldest local dwelling for which we have a clear image – a photograph taken in 1904, just before the place was torn down to build a church. Though altered since the 1820s, the house was clearly a more considered construction – an example of the influence of the Georgian taste for symmetry and restraint that held sway when the colony was founded. ‘Crows Nest Cottage’ was so-named because it sat up so high. Its lofty and removed location may have related to the disposition of its owner. Wollstonecraft’s own business partner Alexander Berry remarked that his temper was ‘barely tolerable’. But possibly the misanthropic magistrate also desired good soil, for the Blue Gum High Forest on the ridge top had that where none existed down on the waterfront. Upon Edward’s death in 1832 it was said that the farm boasted ‘luxuriant’ orchards and gardens, and that the owner had developed his own variety of nectarine there.
While Edward was still tending his fruit trees in the space he had cleared among the gum trees, the *Australian* newspaper reported news of the planning of a road that would connect Castle Hill to the north shore and predicted that, with the construction of such public work, 'we would see a town rising on the North Shore equal in consequence to Sydney'.\(^4\) That prediction, in 1828, suggested that there was little development then on the north shore. A decade later saw the surveying and gazettal of a township called St Leonards.

However, there was still little there in 1840. Then the artist and writer Louisa Meredith recorded what she saw in a pencil sketch while sitting at Mrs Macquarie’s Chair. She later wrote down her observations: 'The opposite or north shore of Port Jackson, here about two miles across, is rather a monotonous character. Hills of no great elevation and very tame outline rise from the beach, dotted here and there with villas and cottages, their adjoining gardens making a pleasant green contrast with the uniform brown hue of the scrub. Numbers of boats were pulling and sailing about giving animation to the scene.'\(^5\)

The accuracy of Meredith’s words probably surpasses that of her drawing – which is somewhat confusing in its scale and shows just two houses on the north side – both apparently two-storey

---

\(^4\) *Australian*, 9 April 1828  
stone Georgian dwellings. One of these may be ‘Craignathan’, built at Neutral Bay in 1831 but usually described as a bungalow. The other was probably the stone house of James Robertson at Robertson Point (now usually called Cremorne Point).

There weren’t many houses but there certainly more than two. One of those was the villa Billy Blue had built for himself and his family at the point that had taken his name thereby erasing the unfortunate earlier moniker for the area, Murdering Point. James Milson had erected ‘Brisbane House’ above Lavender Bay by 1840 and ‘Carabella Cottage’ stood on the east side of Kirribilli. And above Neutral Bay was the solid stone Georgian cottage, ‘Henbury’, built by Norfolk-born farmer John Crane Parker.

Still it was less a township than a sprinkling of houses. And the sprinkle did not become a covering over the next decade, for then the colony was caught in the depths of its first great economic recession.

Indeed, evidence of a town rising is barely obvious in the trig survey completed by Surveyor General Thomas Mitchell and printed in 1853. It shows a string of buildings along the road extending back from Blues Point – this was the first gazetted road in the area and the foreshore there accommodated the first ferry wharfage.

---

*The original 1840 panoramic pencil drawing is held at the Powerhouse Museum*
In 1835, the Quaker James Backhouse made the trip across the water; probably to Blues Point from where he wandered around before arriving at ‘Henbury’ cottage. There, he had ‘an interesting meeting with the inhabitants of the North Shore of Port Jackson... The Divine Presence was sensibly felt, and ability was afforded us, to direct the congregation, to the teaching of the Lord...’”

John Crane Parker was, it seems, a pious man.

A decade later there were enough residents and enough religiosity to warrant the construction of the first church, St Thomas’ Anglican, which sat appropriately high above the dispersed settlement. One of those locals was the artist Conrad Martens whose stone house ‘Rockleigh Grange’ was also standing by the time Louisa Meredith sat with her pencil and papers but may

---

*James Backhouse, A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies, London, 1843, pp.290-291*
have been obscured by a forest as yet uncleared. The undeveloped north shore was a perfect comparative foreground for his many sketches of the busy southern side.

It was in 1853, when the trig map was printed, that the landowner, politician and merchant Alexander Berry chose to subdivide land on the eastern extremity of the vast estate he had inherited from his wife Elizabeth who, in turn, had inherited it from her brother Edward, the bad tempered owner of ‘Crows Nest Cottage’. So the Wollstonecraft Estate became the Berry Estate.

Berry’s land release was described as the ‘Highly Important Sale of extensive Villa Allotments’. But he did not pick his time well. For while a recession could dampen the market, so might a boom. In this case a boom created by the rush for gold. The population of St Leonards actually fell between 1851, when news of gold to the west hit the colony and there were 737 people living here, and 1854 when there were only 464.

Berry was a wealthy man. Most of his money came from the produce grown far to the south on the property called Coolangatta in the Shoalhaven. With that he built a large villa called ‘Crows Nest House’. It was the abode he had long hoped for but, by the time he moved in around 1850, the endless rooms must have emphasized Berry’s loneliness and loss. Elizabeth, with whom he had intended to share the place, had died in 1845. With nowhere nearby to bury her, Alexander gave a corner of his vast estate to St Thomas’s Church as a cemetery – the first European burial ground on the north shore. Elizabeth was interred in a sandstone pyramid 10 feet high – evidence of her husband’s esteem and his interest in classicism. It remains one of Australia’s finest examples of colonial Egyptian Classicism and possibly the only mausoleum of its kind in this country.

Berry was no democrat. Although he did not choose a far flung ridge for his new house, he did surround it with a capacious garden and a high palisade fence. Both house and garden sat at the edge of the town that was slowly forming. There was something of the ‘squire and village’ in this relationship. After some of the ‘villagers’ petitioned for the formation of a Borough of St Leonards in 1859, a local government entity which would have allowed the raising of funds for infrastructure and services through rates and government subsidies, Berry used his influence to thwart the process. He did not want to pay rates on his vast estate. When the first local government area was declared in 1860 it was called East St Leonards and notably did not include the big estate to the west and only half of the Coopers’ ‘Thrupp estate’ to the east.

East St Leonards did include Kirribilli – an area which was about to become the dress circle of the Harbour. For with the establishment of a regular ferry service to the north shore – first to Blues Point and then to Milsons Point - the focus of development was to shift markedly from west to centre. Alfred Street, present in the 1853 trig map, would ultimately take over from Blues Point Road as the main thoroughfare from the waterfront. By the 1890s a great barrel roofed ferry terminal stood there to meet cable trams that would take commuters and shoppers up the steep hill to the top of Miller Street – the main street in the grid form town layout that was taking shape. Lane Cove Road headed off to the northwest – its direction determined in large part by the boundary of Berry’s Estate.
At Kirribilli merchants and senior public servants built their marine villas. Wine dealer William Tucker built Clifton in the 1850s. Collector of Customs JGN Gibbes built Wotonga (now much altered as Admiralty House) in the 1850s. Merchant Adolph Feez built the neighbouring dwelling we know today as ‘Kiribilli House’ by 1859. Sunnyside was completed for Deputy-Master of the Mint, Robert Hunt, by 1861. Mary Talbot was one of the few independent women of means to secure property there. Owner of a local boarding house, she built Greencliffe near to Milsons Point by 1860.

Where once Sydney had been a Georgian town, the fashion now was for Gothic. In 1833, the English architectural writer JC Loudon had published his *An Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture*, probably the most influential of several pattern books that provided design advice to the wealthy and aspirational. Most of the dwellings depicted were Gothic characterised by high pitched roofs, asymmetrical configuration and occasionally a castellated tower. Loudon suggested that the ideal location for such a villa was ‘a day’s journey from the metropolis’ and then in a varied landscape with a village nearby for added picturesque appeal. Those books found their way to colonial libraries. St Leonards was now barely half an hour away from Sydney by ferry but it was sufficiently separated by the Harbour to fit the qualification; and the elevated shores and ridges that rose back from the water afforded wonderful views.

The Britishness that underpinned the Gothic taste evolved into a love of English Revival and Arts and Crafts styles – so that Neutral Bay became a showcase for that architecture. It was heralded by the house ‘Penshurst’, designed by architect and East St Leonards alderman Walter Liberty Vernon, one of a number of English architects who emigrated in the 1880s. A little bit of medieval England came to North Sydney beginning a design evolution that led to the Federation house.

![Figure 11: ‘Penshurst’, photographed in 1968, North Sydney Heritage Centre / Stanton Library collection](image)
Vernon, Edward Jefferson Jackson (another local English arrival) and others took up the belief of William Morris that crafted beauty should be infused where ever possible. So that by the first years of the new century, North Sydney homes featured glorious stained glass windows, installed by those who could afford them, and beautifully simple examples of the artisan’s craft in modest speculator bungalows.

The original ‘Penshurst House’ in Kent had been the family seat of the Sidneys - a distinguished lineage that included Lord Sydney after whom the city of Sydney had been named. St Leonards was the home of Lord Sydney’s son. There was then an interesting resonance with the construction of another Penshurst at Neutral Bay. Henry Parkes might have called it the ‘Crimson Thread of Kinship’.

Not everyone deferred to the tradition of old ties and nomenclature. Just five years later, on the eve of the formation of the Borough of North Sydney, local resident and prominent public servant Alexander Oliver made the remarkable suggestion that the whole place be called Cammeray instead of St Leonards or North Shore, for that was ‘the least recognition we can make of the great Cammeray tribe, which we have driven out of their heritage’.

Who knows what those original owners thought of all the building being undertaken in the 1880s. That there were Aboriginal people still in ‘St Leonards’ as late as the 1870s is indisputable. Some were there as servants and stable hands. In 1878, however, a sympathetic Blues Point Resident (anticipating the sentiments of Oliver) noted the presence of an Aboriginal camp at Berrys Bay. In a remarkably modern turn of phrase this correspondent suggest that ‘considering the vast territory which has been wrested from these poor people without any compensation I take it would be a graceful act to allow them the privilege of pointing to one of these small islands at the entrance to the metropolis as still their own’. The writer had in mind Goat Island. Instead most of the city’s remaining Indigenous folk were moved off to La Perouse, far to the south.

By then Berrys Bay, and indeed all the land beyond the boundaries of East St Leonards, was represented by local government. For in 1867, despite the wishes of an elderly Alexander Berry, there were sufficient numbers to successfully petition for the creation of the Borough of St Leonards which took in much of present-day North Sydney across to Mosman. Four years later, in 1871, the sense of localism and separate needs was such that a group around Lavender Bay and McMahons Point split to form the Borough of Victoria.

---

8 Sydney Morning Herald, 9 June 1890
9 Sydney Morning Herald, 23 September 1878
By the mid-1880s the existence of three Borough Councils governing 12,000 people was becoming unsustainable in the minds of many. In 1889 the Freeman’s Journal that covered north shore news closely argued that, as a result, ‘extravagance is unavoidable and debt inevitable’. It went on to ask that ‘While Federation is in the air, would it not be advisable to catch the breeze and make another effort for union?’

Ratepayers in the three Boroughs voted for union in 1890 and North Sydney Council was established on 29 July. There had been agreement already on the name for the new area. ‘North Sydney’, was chosen to replace the sentimental favourite ‘St Leonards’ because it linked the place to the metropolis on the south side. After all the new mayor, Francis Punch, was not alone in regarding North Sydney the ‘most important borough outside Sydney’. There was more than just civic pride to this. The Freeman’s Journal reported that those who backed the new name did so because it would ‘give the suburb a better standing amongst the moneylenders of London’.

Punch was one who, in many ways, typified the civic leaders of his day in the Harbour city: an engineer, a property owner, a businessman and a sportsman. Having rowed competitively as a young man, Punch held office in the NSW Rowing Association and the North Shore Rowing Club.

---

10 Freeman’s Journal, 23 November 1889
11 Sydney Morning Herald, 28 October 1890
12 Freeman’s Journal, 5 April 1890
But he was also an Irish Catholic – something not without significance in a city still riven by sectarian and ethnic division between Catholics and non-Catholics, Irish and non-Irish. How this related to local politics is not clear for North Sydney accommodated fewer Irish-born residents and Catholics than the Sydney average of 8 and 24% respectively.

Less remarkable was the fact that Punch and his fellow councillors were men. The New South Wales Municipalities Act of 1867 explicitly excluded women from standing for local government and even denied them the right to petition for the creation of a local municipality. However, it made no such distinction with regards to voting rights. ‘Every person’ over 21 who was the ‘occupier lessee’ or owner of ‘rateable property’ was apparently entitled to vote. This meant some women in North Sydney might have participated in Council ballots - well before they could vote in Parliamentary elections.

When North Sydney was established, its population stood at around 17,000. The growth since the 1850s, when barely 500 people called the place home, had been extraordinary. The new Council attempted to service the population with garbage collection, by calls to tenders for ‘night soil’ (human waste) collection which was then dispersed, in a somewhat furtive manner, across Cammeray Park. Footpaths were tar-paved. Some roads were covered with blue metal and others were wetted in the dry months to control the dust – sometimes as often as twice a day. Council bought coal gas from the North Shore Gas Works which was then piped to the 400 or so gas lamps that lined local streets by 1897. The rather polluted mud flats at Careening Cove and Neutral Bay were resumed and filled in to create Milson and Anderson Park respectively.13

Under the Public Health Act of 1896, Council was also compelled to monitor infectious disease, something they apparently started to do in 1898. That year, records show that 134 children contracted scarlet fever, 90 diphtheria and 44 typhoid. Bad water was part of the problem. Mains water had only been supplied since 1888 and many people, no doubt, still had rainwater tanks. Local creeks might well have been contaminated by the many cesspits still in use, for the sewerage system wasn’t completed until 1898. And then there was contaminated milk – possibly from the dairies that still operated at the northern end of the municipality around Cammeray and north Cremorne.

It was at that less populated end of the municipality that the sewerage treatment plant was built. The various pipes converged on a main sewer which took the waste to Long Bay, just beyond the once picturesque Willoughby Falls. Pumping stations were built to move the waste uphill from the lower areas around Kirribilli and Lavender Bay. A huge chimney-like brick vent shaft, still standing tall on the corner of St Leonards Park, released gases from the main sewer. Like previous schemes on the south side, this form of sewerage ultimately resulted in waste, albeit treated, flowing into the Harbour. By 1927, when the system was closed, the Long Bay outfall works was serving more than 14,000 homes and approximately 70,000 people. After that, sewage was emptied into the ocean near North Head and the North Sydney treatment plant was converted into Primrose Park – a name derived from the surname of a contemporary Alderman but which carried the pleasant connotation of a posey covering foulness. In the hard times of the

---

13 Anderson Park was originally called Warringa Park
1930s, locals could be seen regularly picking up lumps of filtering coke from the old treatment beds to use or sell as fuel.

Figure 13. The Willoughby Bay sewerage treatment beds around 1900, North Sydney Heritage Centre / Stanton Library collection

The sewerage works probably affected the smell of that part of the local area – cutting across the scent of eucalypt and salt water in summer. But it did little to alter the easy pace of that waterway. Compared to its crowded and busy counterpart to the south, Middle Harbour was serene. It was there in 1879 that Edward Augustus Macpherson built a two-storey 10-12 room stone retreat for himself and his family. Edward, with his brother Joseph Warrie Macpherson (after whom the northern Sydney suburb of Warriewood would later be named) had bought up much of the waterfront and land around the site of the house. As a result, the family name Macpherson was attached to one of the early streets of the area which ran along the boundary of their land.
Edward’s choice of Italianate styling may have been influenced by a love of Italian landscape art. Certainly early photographs of the house, in its remote and wooded setting on Middle Harbour, evoke the 17th century art of Claude Lorrain and the Campania area of Italy. A boat Harbour was built in the early 1890s.

Where there was space in abundance to the north, the streets around the southern shore were becoming crowded with terrace houses – a space efficient and cost effective way of building introduced from England’s industrial towns. From Milsons Point to Berrys Bay most people lived close to the water, not so much for the views, as the convenience of access to ferries and, for the many engaged in boatbuilding, to work. This was Henry Lawson’s North Sydney – the community he came to know from 1900 as his fortunes waxed and waned and he followed the supportive Isabella Byers from one rented house to another. These were the folk he called ‘the Harbour people’. While there was waterfront industry to be found even at salubrious Kurraba Point, it was in the west that most of the working waterfront was established. At Lavender Bay boatbuilders shared the water with swimmers who did laps at Professor Cavill’s baths where reputedly the ‘Australian Crawl’ was developed as a competitive style. But the heart of boatbuilding was in Berrys Bay where Dunn Brothers, Fords and Woodleys had their yards.

Artists had had little time for the working Harbour in the 19th century. Arthur Streeton, it seems, never found an appealing view west of McMahons Point, and then he turned his gaze back to the east where ferries left languorous wakes and all was beautiful. But in the first decades of the 20th Century Lloyd Rees, Roland Wakelin and others came to Berrys Bay to depict the picturesque
chaos of what was then an old style waterfront expunged from Walsh Bay and Darling Harbour where new finger wharves had been built in the wake of plague.

In 1916 Henry Lawson was outraged when that working waterfront, in the form of a planned coal loader, encroached upon his beloved Balls Head – ‘the only spot of cliff and bush’ that the ‘Harbour people’ knew. As a result he penned one of the earliest conservation protests linking preservation to community, the poem called ‘The Sacrifice of Balls Head’.

Those first two decades of the new century – following Depression and Federation - were happy and optimistic ones for the middle class, who were moving into the newly opened land at Neutral Bay, Cremorne, and Wollstonecraft which was being carved out of Alexander Berry’s estate – a subdivision that had proceeded apace after his death in 1873.

The mood is epitomised by a photograph of architect Donald Esplin and his family outside the house that he designed around in Shirley Road, Wollstonecraft. ‘Illaroo’ looked as if it had been transplanted from an English garden suburb. And in an ideological sense it had - for the British ideas of building and design remained dominant for three decades after Penshurst was built.

(Left) Figure 15. Donald Esplin and family, 1911, Courtesy Esplin family and Robert Irving.

(Right) Figure 16. Illaroo, 1911, Courtesy Esplin family and Robert Irving.

The Britishness reflected in the design of local homes was roused emphatically in the call to arms which followed the outbreak of war in 1914. Some 4,000 men signed up between 1914 and 1918 – a full 10% of the local population. The residents of Neutral Bay which had spread out around Vernon’s Penshurst were among the most enthusiastic. The recruits came from all levels of society. Brian Pockley, doctor and former Shore School boy, epitomised the cream of the elite and symbolised the terrible waste. He was among the first to be killed in September 1914. A school chapel, already planned, became a shrine to the dead when it opened portentously in April 1915. By then Edmund Watt, a young warehouseman from Ridge Street, had also joined. Edmund went to the local public school run by Nimrod Greenwood. It is testimony to the
effectiveness of the public education system which had brought in compulsory schooling in 1881 that Edmund could keep a diary and record his experiences at Gallipoli with articulate self-reflection. Indeed his expression was filled with what might be mistaken for British understatement: ‘We had a rather hot time with bombs tonight, got slightly mixed up with one but not serious’, he wrote on the 9th August immediately after taking part in the Battle of Lone Pine.\textsuperscript{14}

It wasn’t quite the egalitarian army of national myth – professional men like Pockley generally went in as officers, while the working classes were enlisted men. But there was meritocracy. By 1917 Edmund was a Lieutenant. Then, in October, he joined Pockley on the ever-growing list of wasted life when he was killed leading his men at Polygon Wood on the western front.

(Left) Figure 17. North Sydney Cenotaph, photograph by Harold Cazneaux, 1926, North Sydney Heritage Centre / Stanton Library

(Right) Figure 18. North Sydney Cenotaph, 2015, photograph by Ian Hoskins.

When the bloodletting stopped the residents of North Sydney tried to return to normalcy. The toll on families caused by absent or broken men can never be truly understood. The captured war trophy cannon that was unveiled in St Leonards Park in 1921 speaks only of triumphalism. The Cenotaph, designed by local resident and architect SG Thorp in 1924, conveys the monumental solemnity of the loss far more effectively. In 1926 when it was unveiled the Cenotaph was the biggest memorial of its kind in Sydney, and possibly the state. Bronze plates list the names of hundreds of local ‘glorious dead’. A century after the landing at Gallipoli it was still the focus of local commemoration as more than 1,000 people turned up for the dawn service.

The return to normalcy could not have been easy; least of all for those who found themselves living or working in the path of the planned Sydney Harbour Bridge. It was a great public work – long wished for locally and across the city - and was greeted with rapture by many. The Reverend

\textsuperscript{14} A transcript of this diary is available in the North Sydney Heritage Centre. Stanton Library.
Frank Cash, the rector of Christchurch above Lavender Bay, took this to extremes when he characterised the project as reflective of the ‘hand of God’. He excitedly photographed the Bridge and the houses that were being torn down to make way for it – even as his congregation was dwindling because people were losing their homes.

For the resident of the modest timber cottage at No. 16 Hill Street, North Sydney, the upheaval was surely especially distressing. That building was one of around 500 pulled down; in this case to create the Bridge’s northern approach road. The name of the house, ‘Pozieres’, suggests that its inhabitant had first-hand experience of the maelstrom of the western front. If that person owned the little wooden house, compensation would have been forthcoming. If not, they would have been turned out with a £2 hand-out to take possessions elsewhere. In either case a home called Pozieres, with all the meaning that must have enshrined, was lost.
The Bridge became a defining element of the city and, indeed, a national icon. Its local impact was no less profound. It shifted commercial activity back up the new Highway to Crows Nest and devastated those businesses that survived along lower Alfred Street in the process. It emptied the Harbour of much of the frenetic ferry trade, which could not have helped business in the local boatyards. And it started to turn North Sydney from a transport hub, where ferries, trams and trains met at the waterfront, into a corridor along which people passed on their way to somewhere else.

Figure 20. ‘Down Alfred Street, Milsons Point, 1931-1932’, hand-coloured lithograph by Robert Emerson Curtis, North Sydney Heritage Centre / Stanton Library.

Curtis’ image shows the monolithic presence of the Bridge compared to the surviving buildings on Alfred Street. The roadway shared by trams, horses and cars. The latter mode of transport would replace the former two with profound consequences for the local area.

The growing popularity of the motor car – clear in North Sydney Council building applications for garages and car sheds which numbered 980 between 1914 and 1928 – made this transformation starkly apparent in the years after World War Two. The solution to the problem of congestion was to build an expressway and if that meant demolishing upwards of 600 houses – so be it. The Warringah Expressway epitomised the spirit of the 1950s and 1960s. Progress demanded that the ‘dead bones’ of the city – to use the term of the pre-eminent Modernist architect and planning theorist Le Corbusier – be carted off and disposed of.

By the 1970s, with high rise offices sprouting up beside a busy freeway, few could deny that a town had arisen on the north shore. The ‘dead bones’, or at least the rubble, of some 600 homes were long gone.
Modernism had little time for sentiment or history. When Harry Seidler looked at the waterfront streets around Berrys Bay, Blues Point and McMahons Point his response was as uncompromisingly rational as that of the Expressway engineers. In order to create a perfectly planned community, where Harbour views were uninterrupted and waterfront industry removed to allow waterfront access, it was necessary to get rid of everything and start again.
This was not just the view of a planning elite. Many people regarded old buildings with disdain. At worst they were darkened slums that embodied the worst memories of the Depression years. At best they were just dark. The Blues Point scheme Seidler drafted in 1958 was welcomed by some locals, and the press in general. However, there was neither the money nor the political will to clear fell this part of old north Sydney. Blues Point Tower, then the tallest residential building in the country, was the only manifestation of Seidler’s brave new world.

As the Tower was going up in 1961, the American writer Jane Jacobs was sounding one of the earliest and most influential critiques of Modernism with the publication of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs argued that the best urban places are those that grow organically, that are layered, that sustain a community of old timers and new comers alike. Those arguments came too late to save Bell’vue, or Edmund Barton’s Kirribilli home Miandetta, or many of the big old houses of Wollstonecraft and Waverton, but it informed the campaign to save the Rocks in the 1970s – an area as despised by some as Blues Point had been.

But there was already a local reaction to the apparently unstoppable force of progress. By 1960 a body called the North Sydney Homes Protection Group was arguing that flat development in newly rezoned areas risked overshadowing existing homes and exacerbating traffic congestion. The Cremorne Foreshore Protection League, led by Dr Claire Weekes, opposed high-rise development in that area because of the threat to views. Campaigns on specific developments were won and lost but in 1960 Council agreed to consult with ‘neighbours’ affected by flat development before approval was given.

Accordingly, at Neutral Bay in 1968, Council denied permission to build high-rise on the site of Vernon’s old home ‘Penshurst’ which had just been sold to developers. Overshadowing was the problem but the historical value of the place counted for little. It was not obvious that the report writer knew who Vernon was; that he had been an Alderman on East St Leonards Council before leaving to take up the position as Government Architect in 1890. The significance of the house in architectural history was clearly unrecognised. Council determined that ‘there was no particular merit’ to the house other than ‘the age of the building’ and its association with ‘a Col. Vernon’. So ‘Penshurst’ came down to be replaced by a line of modern town houses that resembled a hacienda.

The watershed 1971 Council election was fought, in large part, over the issue of flat development. It ushered in ‘a new breed’ of Councillors, often young, tertiary-educated, and determined to preserve the characteristics of the localities that had attracted them to North Sydney. Tony Salier ran in the East Ward then representing North Cremorne on a ticket that promised ‘a complete ban on further high rise development in the ward’. Robyn Read had lived in North Sydney for most of her life but, after moving to Wollstonecraft with her young family, helped establish the Wollstonecraft Resident Action Group opposing flat development. In 1971, she and John Woodward and Phyllis King were endorsed by the North Sydney Homes Protection Group, Kirribilli Progress Association, and Neutral Bay Civic Amenities Association because of her stand against high-rise: ‘I started sitting around Council meetings listening to these... middle aged men make the most appalling decisions affecting people’s lives’. Read

---

became part of the growing number of female activists and Councillors: ‘it was all a really powerfully based women’s movement... in some ways I think it was our version of the women’s movement.’ Much had changed in the century since the 1867 Municipalities Act had precluded women from intervening directly in local government.

There was another group who formed in reaction to the quickening pace of change. When plans for the redevelopment of Blues Point were made public in 1958, a group of local residents came together as the North Shore Historical Society. Already aware of the existence of the Edmund Blacket designed stone house that was to make way for the new tower, they politely negotiated its careful dissembling and reconstruction elsewhere. These were, after all, the days before Green Bans and violent protest over redevelopment. The old house ‘Bell’vue’ was taken apart but unfortunately never reassembled. The stones sat at the Point until they were carted off elsewhere – possibly ending up as kerb and guttering on the south side of the Harbour.

Figure 23. Bell’vue with Bells Terrace on the left, photographed by Henri Wood, 1955, North Sydney Heritage Centre / Stanton Library.

Despite the setback the Society continued to document and write about local history in the journal that began in 1958. Members also explored the area for other houses that needed saving. In 1969, on a bus tour of the ‘Historic Houses of North Sydney’, Marjory Byrnes discovered ‘Don Bank Cottage’ tucked away near the heart of the rising new CBD. ‘When I peeped over the fence, taking care not to disturb Mrs White, the owner who was sitting peacefully on the front verandah, I knew I loved the place and its garden’.

16 Robyn Read interviewed by Margaret Park, Merle Coppell Oral History Collection OH226 North Sydney Heritage Centre / Stanton Library
17 Marjory Byrne, ‘Don Bank’ The research and restoration of North Sydney’s Oldest Known Surviving House, 1982, p.2
Others fell in love with Don Bank too; and just in the nick of time. Catherine White, who had lived there since 1915, died in 1974 and the future of the house was immediately uncertain. The family, it seems, were aware of the historical significance of the place and were willing to forestall an immediate sale which would have resulted in demolition and redevelopment. It was their understanding that the house had been built by Edward Wollstonecraft on the far eastern corner of his vast estate in the 1820s. The Society lobbied Council who began to explore means to save the place. It was a new era. In 1977 the NSW Heritage Act was passed and money became available to buy and save Don Bank. That happened and what is quite probably the oldest house in the area, with links to the first land grants, remains standing.

In 1981 Council commissioned the State’s first local heritage study. It established the idea of conservation areas—a means of heritage planning that was followed up by a more exhaustive study of local buildings in 1993. That work forms the basis for the current list of Heritage items protected in the Local Environment Plan.

There are some places—Venice and the city of Bath for instance—where change through redevelopment is virtually halted out of respect for the existing fabric. North Sydney is not one of those places—it has been changing since before Henry Lawson declared the spirit of the place dead in 1905, when as he saw it a ‘brand new throng’ were arriving to ‘cart off the houses where the old people used to dwell’.

It is true that change is relative. What was worryingly new to Lawson would seem positively quaint to us. But change is quickening and with rapidity that can come profound upset and alienation for those with only a recent connection to place, let alone a lifetime of association. Before he retired from academia the Western Australian based environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term ‘solastagia’ to try and represent the sense of impending or real loss that one might feel while still at home. ‘The built and natural environments are now changing so rapidly that our language and conceptual frameworks have to work overtime just to keep up... there is now a mismatch between our lived experience of the world, and our ability to conceptualise and comprehend it... solastalgia is a form of “homesickness” like that experienced with traditionally defined nostalgia, except that the victim has not left their home or home environment’.

It is a feeling I experience every time I see a house come down. But to offset the melancholy I look to examples of respect for fabric and that organic texture of a place that Jane Jacobs identified 50 years ago. A walk around Euroka Street where Henry Lawson used to dwell is good for the soul.

Figure 25. Euroka Street cottages, protected as part of the Union / Bank / Thomas Streets Conservation Area. Photograph by Ian Hoskins, 2007

So too is a stroll to ‘Henbury’ to look at its pecked stonework. That house has stood since 1835 above Neutral Bay – now it accommodates solar panels but still declares its age as well.

Figure 26. ‘Henbury Villa’, Nook Lane, Neutral Bay, 2014, photograph by Ian Hoskins

A town has risen on the North Shore, indeed more than once. But there are still layers to be found - and kept I hope. The role of Council’s Historical Services staff is to collect, preserve, document and interpret, and help the local community to understand the place they may have known for years or that they have just come to know.
Fittingly, in its 125th year, Council has built a state of the art storage facility in Cammeray to house our cultural and heritage collections. We are working on refurbishing the displays at Don Bank Museum opened since 1981. We have commissioned a new garden plan that respects what exists but will also invite people to enjoy the space as an oasis in the CBD. We completed a Conservation Management Plan for St Thomas Rest Park and are reworking the displays at Sextons Cottage Museum there, beginning with the commissioning of a reproduction 19th century mourning dress which will take pride of place in the small museum. Opening in three weeks here in the Heritage Centre is the exhibition ‘A ‘Premier’ Place: North Sydney in the 1890s.’ We are putting the final touches to an on-line exhibition, ‘At Home in North Sydney’, which explores local history through architecture and the many beautiful plans we have in the collection. In August we have another of our ferry trips along the waterfront – this one marking the 125th Anniversary of Council.

This has been a busy year and we will stay busy for the rest of 2015. It's a tough job but someone has to do it – I'm very grateful to be part of that 'someone'. Thanks very much for your support.