Guest Speaker: Noel Phelan

Noel Phelan's first career was as a science and mathematics teacher. He then moved into IT with IBM where he spent 25 years in various technical and management positions.

He has been a volunteer guide at the Maritime Museum for several years and enjoys showing visitors over HMAS Vampire, HMAS Advance, HMAS Onslow and First Lady. Noel is also the team leader for the museum speakers.

Noel is a Past President of the Northbridge Rotary Club, and he is an active volunteer in retirement with sailability and sailing captain of his sailing club. Noel also served as a director of Taldumande – the organisation that looks after homeless and at-risk young people north of the harbour. He also spent several years with Marine Rescue and the Rural Fire Service.

Topic: The Halvorsen Story

We are all immigrants to this country seeking a better life for ourselves and our families. The Halvorsen family was typical in that it came with very little and worked very hard to build a better life. However, the Halvorsen family did more than that - they showed extraordinary commitment to boat building and excellent craftsmanship and boat design skills that made their boats desired by wealthy business people, commercial companies and key politicians.

In addition, the Halvorsen boat yard at Ryde produced over 250 boats of all types to support the war effort during WWII.

Many people enjoyed a holiday on a Halvorsen cruiser based at Bobbin Head. This was the largest hire fleet in the southern hemisphere with lots of celebrities enjoying the beautiful Hawkesbury River.
Rebecca’s engaging talk consisted of two sequential histories: first, the history of the use as a colonial cemetery of the site on which the Town Hall now stands, followed by the history of the building of the Town Hall itself on the reclaimed site.

Cemeteries in colonial times were located on the outskirts of the expanding settlement and the Town Hall site was the first proclaimed general cemetery in Sydney. The site, later known as the Old Sydney Burial Ground, was chosen in 1792 by Governor Phillip and Rev Richard Johnson and by the time of its 1820 closure, 2,300 people had been buried there. Rebecca presented a map from Nicolas Baudin’s visit to Port Jackson in 1801 that showed the first cemetery at a prominent intersection of two main roads. There were no restrictions on who could be buried in the cemetery – convicts, soldiers and free citizens alike – nor were their grave sites separated in a denominational fashion, as later became the fashion. Anglican clergy, however, officiated at all burials and the military were all interred in the same sector. It appears that no records were kept of those who were buried in this cemetery nor of where their graves were located. An extensive list of names has recently been prepared from other historical records of those likely to have been buried in the cemetery during the time that it was open.

By 1820, the first cemetery was full and so Governor Macquarie closed it. A second general cemetery was then opened at Brickfield Hill, where Central railway station was subsequently built. This cemetery, later called the New Sydney Burial Ground and also the Devonshire St Cemetery, was closed in 1868 when the Government opened four new cemeteries: South Head, Gore Hill, Balmain and the very extensive Rookwood Necropolis, while also partially closing a second cemetery, the one at Camperdown.

With the introduction of representative Government into NSW in 1842, the City of Sydney Council was established with elections, offices for officers and all of the trappings of a free society. Governor Gipps appointed the magistrate Charles Windeyer as the first Mayor of Sydney until the second Mayor, John Hosking, could be elected several months later. But where could the new Council meet to carry out its functions? The Old Burial Ground was by now very neglected: many headstones had been vandalised and unpleasant smells sometimes emanated from the cemetery due to its lead coffins being stolen by grave robbers. The Council wanted to build its Town Hall on this site but politics and public opposition to disturbing graves prevented this from proceeding. So, for more than 30 years, the Sydney Council met in various pubs and buildings around town.

The impasse was broken opportunistically during the visit to Sydney in 1868 by Prince Alfred, Queen Victoria’s second son and the first royal to visit Australia. He was shot in the leg by an unhinged Irish patriot when at a picnic at Clontarf and during his enforced rehabilitation layover, the Prince laid the foundation stone for the new Town Hall. This was an audacious step by the Council as it did not yet own the cemetery land on which the foundations were laid, a transfer that only occurred in the following year. When this transfer had been realised, human remains could then be exhumed from the cemetery, although only from the proposed building’s footprint area. These unidentified remains were reinterred at the new Rookwood cemetery, where they were memorialised by a large classical monument.

A design competition for the Town Hall was won in Second Empire style by JH Wilson, an English architect working in Hobart. The conditions imposed upon the winner required the building to be finished in three years at a cost of less than £25,000 with the strength of its walls being approved by the Colonial Architect, James Barnet, and the landscaping done by the long-term Director of the Botanic Gardens, Charles Moore. After the premature death of John Wilson, the construction was overseen by Albert Bond, the first full-time City Architect and later architect of the iconic Anthony Hordern’s Emporium store. Bond designed the entry vestibule, which Rebecca considers to be the Town Hall’s *tour de force*. Building, however, was halted when
the project ran out of money and so in 1875 the Council moved into the ground floor of an unfinished building.

The building was not finished until the opening in 1889 of the Centennial Hall (known originally as the Great Hall until renamed for the second centenary). It was designed by Thomas Sapsford assisted by Jack Hennessey and its construction was delayed beyond the first centenary year due to the wrong measurements of its requisite steel girders being sent to their manufacturer in Sheffield. Nevertheless, until the completion of the Opera House in 1973, the Centennial Hall was to be Sydney’s largest indoor venue, especially popular for musical events. It was the first public space to be serviced by permanent electric lighting and is considered to be the finest example of an English Renaissance styled interior in Australia. Its design, due in particular to Jack Hennessey, included Lucien Henry’s magnificent internal stained-glass windows that featured Australian flora for the first time. The Town Hall’s Grand Organ built by William Hill was installed in 1890. It was at that time the largest organ in the world and it remains the world’s largest organ without any electrically activated components.

In question time, Rebecca stated that for her, the most historically interesting person to be buried in the Town Hall cemetery was Elizabeth Steel, who in 1789 was transported to Sydney for seven years for stealing a silver watch. At her trial in the Old Bailey, she was described as “mute by visitation of God”, which is the earliest record of a deaf person in Australia, transported or otherwise. In 1991, a headstone was unearthed beneath the Town Hall on which could be deciphered the words: “In memory of Eliz. Steel who died June 7th, 1795”. Another burial of historical significance at this site according to Trove was that of General Sir Maurice O’Connell in 1848, long after the cemetery was closed to commoners. O’Connell was the Commander of British Forces in Australia and NSW Lieutenant Governor (not to mention also being Governor William Bligh’s son-in-law) and his funeral brought Sydney to a complete standstill, being the largest up to that time. O’Connell’s remains were later transferred to Camperdown cemetery via Devonshire St.

Rebecca’s instructive talk did more than justice to the two important historical themes that it illuminated. The Town Hall today remains an important focus for Sydney’s events, with at least one event happening there every day.

E/Prof Don Napper

Welcome to new member- David Gillan
As the indexing volunteer for the Heritage Centre of North Sydney Council, I am creating a searchable database of the Accession Records of the Council’s correspondence from 1910 to 1955. Currently I am up to 1930 and have entered 25,000 entries onto their database.

In this month’s bulletin, I thought I’d share some of the interesting and unusual letters I came across, while indexing the correspondence from the late 1920’s to 1930, and have grouped them under the headings of the Good, the Bad and the Ugly (apologies to Sergio Leone and his 1966 Western starring Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach & Lee Van Cleef!).

The Good (citizens)

1. A Letter from the North Sydney Town Clerk, Mr. H. Perry, to Mr & Mrs E.P. Boardman of Milson Rd Cremorne dated 30 March 1927- I am directed by my Council to inform you that it was with extreme pleasure that this Council learned of your success in winning the Guardian’s Sydney Garden Competition and have been requested to convey their warmest congratulations.

2. And from Mr H. Perry on 5th September 1929 to Mrs. R. Clements of Eden Hall, corner Ernest and Merlin Streets North Sydney- I am directed to convey the Council’s hearty congratulations on your brilliant achievement in winning the N.S.W. Ladies Golf Championship. It gives the Council particular pleasure knowing that you are a resident of long standing of this Municipality, and a Member of the Local Club. (I assume Cammeray).

3. To Mr Gordon Sergeant of North Sydney Bowling Club at St Leonard’s Park on 4th July 1930 from Mr Perry- I am directed to convey Council’s heartiest congratulations on your brilliant achievement in winning the Single-Handed1 Bowling Championship of New South Wales. Council feels that your success has reflected glory, not only on the Club your represented, but on the whole of this Municipality of which you are a Citizen, and sincerely wish you continued success.

The Bad (boys)

1. Letter to the Mayor from Inspector Walker of North Sydney Police Station dated 11 April 1930, reporting that a 15 year old boy of Ridge St and a 14 year old from James St2 were apprehended pulling up two posts of a fence around a flower bed in St Leonards park, just behind the tram waiting shed in Ridge Street. The Constable accompanied the boys to their respective homes and told their parents what he saw the boys doing. Inspector Walker went on the state that it was necessary that the vandalism that has been going on in the Municipality for some considerable time past should be put down, and the one way to effect a remedy is to make an example of some of the delinquents, otherwise the vandalism will continue.

2. A letter in June 1930 from the Town Clerk to Mrs Williams of Boronia Avenue Wollstonecraft responding to her concern about the destruction of trees in Smoothy Park adjoining the Bowling Green at Greenwich. He stated in response, that the Assistant Engineer had made an inspection and noticed several dead trees had

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1 Single Handed does not mean, as we might interpret today, as a one-handed handicapped player, but it is referring to the Singles title, compared with the Pairs Championship
2 James Street (now James Place) ran between McLaren and Ridge Streets at rear of St Thomas’ and the Stanton library
been cut down and the remains of logs cut up and removed. During his inspection, parties of boys with billy carts and axes were seen and when questioned, they informed the engineer they were only picking up dead timber. He warned them not to take any timber of any description from the Park. Additionally, the Park Ranger has been instructed to patrol the park regularly.

3. The Town Clerk Mr. H. Perry wrote to the Headmaster of St. Leonards Grammar School in Alfred Street (no longer in existence), on 3 October 1930 informing him that several complaints had been received regarding the playing of cricket in the north eastern corner of St. Leonards Park by students of his school, and Council decided not to allow this practice to continue. This area included the high ground near the band stand and also on open spaces in front of the Bowling Club. In my opinion cricket and football should only be permitted inside the ovals. The public should be able to move freely about the park without fear of being hit by a cricket ball or knocked over by a wild rush of youths.

The Engineer Mr. A. Beckham next stated on 20 October that the head gardener, Mr. F. Harrison, reported that the students continued to play cricket in the north-east corner of the park, notwithstanding the notices and warnings by attendants. Pedestrians have complained about the danger of being struck by the ball. There is no doubt the risk is great, owing to the proximity of the crease to the path. He then went on the state that the idea expressed by the Head Master to gardener Harrison that his pupils have an unalienable and irrevocable right to play there at all time, should be corrected.

The Town Clerk wrote again to the Headmaster on 12 November asking that he request his students not to play cricket or football in this portion of the park. (There is no further correspondence in the subsequent six months that I am aware of, on the matter by either party, so we might optimistically assume the Headmaster finally implemented the Council’s request!)

The Ugly (and smelly)

1. Letter dated 30 March 1930 to the Health Inspector from a resident of 42 West St North Sydney (now a high-rise building) stating I am renting a flat at this address and it contains two rooms and kitchenette. The kitchenette has a lavatory in the middle of the room which is long and narrow, and I don’t think it is at all
healthy doing cooking and eating in the same room. I think it could be made different if the owner was made to remove the lavatory to the far end of the kitchen and a little bathroom could be made. It is not only unhealthy but an eye sore to everybody. I have rented the room off the owner, but I don’t want her to know that I have written to you. If you come on Tuesday mornings, I can let you see the kitchen. I am paying 20 shillings per week rent. Mrs Stuart.

And the reply in April from the Health Inspector was that he had inspected the premises and the owner will be served with a **Public Health Act notice**. The Act being referred to was the 1928 Health Act and from PART VII. NUISANCES, my abridged version reads: Any premises in such a state as to be a nuisance or injurious or dangerous to health and is not kept in a cleanly state and free from effluvia arising from any drain, privy, water-closet, earth-closet, urinal, or other nuisance; or is not ventilated in such a manner as to render harmless, so far as practicable, any gases, vapours, dust, or other impurities generated that are a nuisance or injurious or dangerous to health, shall be nuisances liable to be dealt with summarily under this Act. Phew!!!

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**May 2019 Outing - Parramatta Female Factory**

**Friday 17th May**

*Voted popular choice by our members for a 2019 outing!*

**Departure is 9.00 am from the council carpark (our usual spot when we travel by Community bus). Anticipated return to North Sydney approx. 12.30 pm. Cost $10 return bus fare plus $5 for the tour.**

The guided tour explores the rare Governor Macquarie & Francis Greenway site which was once home to at least 5,000 of the 24,960 convict women transported "beyond the seas" and from whom an estimated 1/5th to 1/7th Australians are descended. The guides share inspiring and touching stories of the women’s lives, their survival and much more!

The site is within the grounds of the Cumberland Hospital so we can only look at the buildings from the outside. In places the ground is uneven so walking shoes are recommended.

The Female Factory friends have a petition they would like you to sign as visitors, asking the Government to have this National Heritage site World Heritage listed.

**To participate please register by email to the Outings Officer, susan.wade@ozemail.com.au**