HENRY LAWSON’S
NORTH SYDNEY

A walking tour from McMahons Point to Balls Head

Distance: Approx. 3 Km
Approximate time: 2.5 hours
Grading: High (there are several sets of steep inclines and stairs to negotiate)

Introduction

Henry Lawson (1867-1922) is quite possibly Australia’s best known poet. Along with Banjo Paterson, he did most to present ‘the bush’ to Australians at a time, in the late 19th century, when this country’s national identity was coalescing around images and stories from the interior. The role of writers such as Lawson, and painters like Arthur Streeton, was particularly important in light of the fact that Australia was already a highly urbanised nation by the time the colonies Federated in 1901. The ‘Legend of the Bush’ had great resonance in the city.

And yet Lawson, too, spent much of his time in Sydney – and North Sydney. He lived in numerous dwellings between 1885, when he stayed with Mrs Emma Brooks in East Crescent Street, and 1920. You will pass by some of his residences on this walk. Other dwellings and places of significance include: Strathmere, Lord Street in 1899; rooms above the Coffee Palace in Miller Street run by Mrs Isabel Byers who would care for Lawson for many years after this; Chaplin Cottage, Charles Street where Lawson’s second child Bertha was born in 1900; and Dind’s Hotel at the bottom of Alfred Street Milsons Point – the subject of the very funny poem ‘Dinds Hotel’ –

… We hurried out of Campbell Street, and round to Dind’s hotel
Where after two long beers apiece, we found the world “orrright”…

Curiously while Australia’s rural landscape was being well-interpreted and mythologised in poetry and prose, the communities around Sydney’s by-then famous Harbour were rarely explored in writing. Lawson’s portraits of life near the North Sydney waterfront are among the most intimate and rare portrayals of ‘harbour people’ written.

The span of Lawson’s association with North Sydney coincided with great change. The local population grew from just over 12,000 in 1886 to 48,000 in 1920. In the early 1900s North Sydney was at the forefront of flat development as working people crowded around the foreshores to take advantage of regular ferry services to and from the city. Around 1910 Lawson expressed his annoyance at the changes taking
place around him. ‘Old North Sydney’ is an early and significant expression of community and loss in the face of the development that many welcomed as progress. It provides an important perspective on the degree to which Sydney has, for many years, been a city of flux and change:

...A brand new crowd is thronging
The brand new streets aglow
Where the Spirit of North Sydney
Would gossip long ago.
They will not know to-morrow –
Tho’ ‘twere but yesterday –
Exactly how McMahon’s Point
And its Ferry used to lay...

Our walk begins at McMahons Point Ferry Wharf on Henry Lawson Avenue. Take a moment to look around from this site and locate the following elements of the landscape – now much altered.

This loop road was named in honour of Lawson. Formerly known as Cliff Avenue, the present road was formed after 1909 when the cliff was excavated for a tramway loop servicing the McMahons Point Ferry Wharf. The quiet residential foreshore today is very different to the waterfront that Lawson knew so well.

McMahons Point Wharf
This started operating in 1884 with an all-night ferry service between Circular Quay and the north shore. From 1906 Sydney Ferries ran services at 15 minute intervals and every 10 minutes at peak hour. Whilst Milsons Point was by far the busiest of North Sydney’s ferry wharves, the McMahons Point and Lavender Bay service was a popular and busy transport route with over 6,000,000 passenger trips each year before the opening of the Bridge. By the 1930s steam ferries were berthed at the Point and the wharf bustled with activity – coal loading, water tanks and other infrastructure to support the steam ferries.

Arthur Streeton painted the wharf twice in 1890 - in Morning Sketch/ McMahons Point Ferry and From McMahons Point – Fare One Penny. Streeton lived for a period at the Little Sirius Cove artists’ camp in Mosman. He and Lawson shared mutual acquaintances and may well have met locally.

The old boathouse and slipway at 1a Henry Lawson Avenue was formerly associated with prominent boatbuilder, Reginald Holmes. His business operated from a number of different sites around Blues Point including the former Neptune Engineering Company site at the head of Lavender Bay.

McMahons Point Vehicular Ferry
The tidy walled foreshore to the west shows little sign of the Blues Point Vehicular Wharf which started operation here in 1901 and continued until 1932, when it was rendered obsolete by the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It was originally used to augment the service to Milsons Point, and was the main cross-harbour terminal on the north side during the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge from 1924-1932.

Ferries traversed the waters between Sydney and Blues Point before formalised ferry services were established. Watermen, such as Billy Blue (for whom the Point is named), offered ferrying facilities at a price. With a captive audience these ferrymen plied their trade offering varying degrees of service - some were noted for their bad temper and unpleasant manner, others for extracting unreasonable fares and their boats were thought to be unsafe and unkempt. Not a satisfactory situation for a growing township and the demands for a proper ferry service were
increasing in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1842 a regular service was established between Blues Point and Windmill Street, Dawes Point with the *Princess*, a steam punt designed to carry passengers and vehicles. Lawson wrote about the vehicular ferry in at least two poems. The following lines are from ‘The Old Horse Ferry’

*The old horse ferry is a democratic boat,*  
*For she mixes up the classes more than any craft afloat;*  
*And the cart of Bill the Bottlo, and the sulky of his boss,*  
*Might stand each side the motor car of Mrs Buster-Cross…* [1914]

**Gibraltar and Bell’vue**

At the tip of the point overlooking the harbour - dominated now by *Blues Point Tower* – was the house known as *Gibraltar* built in the mid-1800s. Around 1906 the house was acquired by Sydney Ferries Limited for the Company’s manager, Mr Todd, who supervised the construction of steamer wharves along the south side of McMahons Point. From this period the waterfront here was often crowded with docked ferries. An indication of how harbour front residences have not always been prized, *Gibraltar* was abandoned and demolished in the 1930s.

Adjoining *Gibraltar* was the Victorian villa *Bell’vue* and *Bells Terrace* and *Belmont*.

The flats next to *Blues Point Tower* occupy the site of the *Figtree Inn* – one of the earliest hotels established in the North Sydney area c.1843. The Inn featured in the Lawson poem, ‘The Pub That Lost Its Licence’:

*The pub that lost its licence*  
*Was very quaint and old;*  
*‘Twas built before the railway,*  
*Before the days of gold.*

1890s view of Blues Point. Gibraltar is partially visible amongst trees adjoining Bellview Terrace, whilst Bellvue is at far right. Note the jetty or slip running down to the water in the front left. (North Sydney Heritage Centre, PC 149)

The Figtree Inn (right) as it appeared in the 1870s. (Courtesy State Library of NSW)
Walk to the stairs leading to East Crescent Street. Stop for a moment to look down the western side of Lavender Bay – once a site for many boatsheds and private bathing enclosures. As you walk up the stairs compare the view to that of Arthur Streeton’s 1890s painting.

Arthur Streeton, Morning Sketch (also known as McMahon’s Point Ferry). 1890, Oil on canvas, Gift of Howard Hinton 1944, New England Regional Art Museum, Armidale, NSW

The flats at the top of the ferry wharf stairs are called Yanderra Hall, 3 East Crescent Street. The block was built around 1913 in a Georgian Revival style – anticipating the future dominance of flats along the western side of Lavender Bay. They may have housed some of ‘the brand new crowd’ that Lawson so disapproved of.

Turn left at East Crescent Street and walk a short distance to East Crescent Reserve.

The large Victorian dwelling (7- 9 Warung Street) next door to this reserve dates to 1888. It is typical of the large marine villas that were being built above Lavender Bay and around the Point, in the Victorian Filigree style, to take advantage of the Harbour views. From the Reserve steps you can get a good look at the decorative cast iron on the balcony that is such a feature of this style.

Head back up East Crescent Street, cross over carefully and stop at the corner of Parker Street.

The large block of flats here (12 East Crescent Street) was probably built in the first decade of the 20th century. Like Yanderra Hall it represents the new style of living that was overtaking North Sydney’s waterfront at this time. The rough cast top floor wall, the use of shingles and the stone base are all features of Federation Arts and Crafts style architecture that found most common expression in large single family dwellings and some government buildings such as post offices and fire stations. Among the most important practitioners of this style were Walter Liberty Vernon who lived in Neutral Bay in the 1880s, Edward Jeaffreson Jackson who lived and practiced locally and BJ Waterhouse whose architecture is a feature of the Shell Cove waterfront.

Head up Parker Street to Middle Street, turn left and go down to Lloyd Rees Lookout.

Lloyd Rees came to Sydney from Brisbane in 1917. Like Lawson, Rees was entranced by the Harbour and quickly began exploring the
northern foreshores, following in the footsteps of Arthur Streeton. Their paths may have crossed in the small local world of artists and writers.

Rees moved to 51 East Crescent Street in 1931 and completed many fine sketches of Balls Head and other local sites at this time.

Middle Street was created as a rear access lane for houses built in the 1860s subdivision of Blues Point Road. The houses that currently front Middle Street were built after further subdivision in the late 1800s. These small dwellings – very modest when compared to the marine villas near the water – are evidence of the mixed social make-up of the area when Henry Lawson frequented these streets.

**Head back up to Parker Street, turn left and then right at Blues Point Road.**

Lawson must have walked up and down Blues Point Road many times. On one occasion he was picked up here by local police merely on suspicion of being drunk – when in reality he was labouring under the strain of the incline.

Lawson’s story ‘The Kids’ begins with a description of local children and billy carts:

*Other vehicles go down Blue’s Point Road to the Horse Ferry and the Government Wharf. They are made of boxes with a little iron bar, with two little cast-iron wheels at the ends, fastened on underneath...Going down they invariably contain a “kid”. (The Bulletin 1913)*

Most of the houses that survive along this thoroughfare would have been familiar to the writer. The filigree-style terraces, **Nos 57-61**, were built in the mid-1890s as respectable lower middle-class dwellings. Several of the sandstone cottages along here, such as **Nos 63, 65 and 73**, are examples of the ongoing popularity of the early Georgian style which typified architecture in the first decades of the colony. These were built as late as the 1880s, and possibly from local sandstone. It is unlikely that these sandstone dwellings were built as speculative ventures, unlike the rows of terraces that sprang up across greater Sydney in the late 1800s.

The adjoining pair of stone houses, **Nos. 89 - 91 Blues Point Rd** is believed to be one of the earliest surviving buildings in Blues Point Rd. The first part of the building was built before 1869 and variously described in Council Rate & Valuation Books as a house and shop or dwelling house and shop or shop, store and dwelling house. A large increase in the annual value between 1869 and 1870 may indicate substantial building work occurred at that time. The second part of the building was erected by the owner Mrs Clewett about 1878.

In 1938 historian and early Neutral Bay resident, G.V.F. Mann, wrote that Clewett operated a dairy farm in that vicinity between East Crescent and Parker Streets and down to the harbour at Lavender Bay.

The **Blues Point Hotel**, on the opposite side of the road, is very different to the pub that Lawson knew here. It was built in 1938 in the inter-war functionalist/art deco style – the work of architects, J.E. & E.R. Justelius and N.D. Frederick who did so much of this work around Sydney. Lawson probably frequented the first hotel on the site – the **North Shore Hotel** which was probably built by publican James Phile about 1864. Later publicans of the hotel include John Blue, Rachael Blue, William Green and William Kelly.

Lawson may have frequented the shops along that side of the road, **Nos. 136-156 Blues**
Point Rd. They were built in the second half of the 19th century to service the needs of the small McMahons Point community. After the 1900s this group of shops were occupied by the usual assortment of local businesses such as grocers, greengrocers, general stores, bootmakers and shoe repairers, barbers, and confectioners.

Keep walking along the eastern side of Blues Point Road.

The small shopping and café precinct on this side of Blues Point Road was formerly two groups of two-storey dwellings. Nos. 123-137 Blues Point Rd were converted into shops and cafes in the 1970s. Nos. 131-135 Blues Point Rd were built at the beginning of 1897, whilst the adjoining houses, Nos. 123-129 Blues Point Rd, are collectively known as the Hopwood Terrace and were built in 1910 (note the name and date on the parapet above the first floor).

Walter George Willington outside his store. The original verandahs and awnings shown in this 1890s view have long since been removed. (North Sydney Heritage Centre, PF 1056)

No. 139 Blues Point Rd was one of the largest local shops during Lawson’s years here. It was originally built and operated as the London Store, Willington and Son, Wholesale and Family Grocers. The upper balcony has filigree iron work to match that of many of the local houses. Willington’s operated the store on the ground floor and lived upstairs. They also held a liquor licence and sold wine by the bottle and glass. The London Store then became a popular drinking spot for many of the locals. Walter Willington and his eldest son Thomas bought the land and building from Michael McMahon – the namesake of McMahons Point – for £600 in July 1890. When Walter died in 1910 he left the property to Thomas and his wife Grace Louise.

After Thomas’s death in 1928 the property passed to Grace. It was eventually leased to, then bought by, McWilliams Wines who did away with the general grocery business and converted it into wine merchants and extended the bar into a larger wine bar selling exclusively McWilliams Wines. In the 1970s it became the Grape Escape Bar and Restaurant, continuing the well established association with wine but also anticipating the gentrification of the area over the next two decades.

Look diagonally across the road to the next corner – Mitchell Street and Blues Point Road.

No. 162 Blues Point Rd. The present modern office building was formerly the site of Hamilton’s Steam Laundry. The laundry was built about 1905 and its tall chimney became a distinctive landmark on the North Sydney skyline – visible from miles away. It was a landmark that remained throughout Lawson’s time here and was not demolished until the 1970s.
Cross over King George Street and turn right, walk down the hill to entry steps to Watt Park.

The house on the opposite side of the street, with the stone arches, No 17, was called Mayfield. In 1906 it was home to Norman Lindsay – one of Australia’s finest black and white illustrators and, like Lawson, a regular contributor to the Bulletin magazine. Lindsay illustrated several of Lawson’s books including the cover of the 1906 collection of verse When I was King in which Lindsay included a likeness of Lawson as King. Architecturally, the pair of semi-detached houses owe much to the work of English Revival architect CFA Voysey whose designs probably influenced local architects such as Edward Jeaffreson Jackson.

Go down the stairs beside the rail line to Watt Park.

The train line that still runs around Lavender Bay was completed in 1893. Watt Park was not created until the late – 1920s on land resumed by the Department of Railways. During Lawson’s time here, there were two large mid-19th century homes on the park site – Neepsend and Hellespont. The large pine trees you can see in the park are plantings from these properties. They became boarding houses in the early 1900s and were demolished to make way for the park.

Walk along this path – Lavender Crescent – and up behind the 1893 viaduct.

The large Victorian-era villa Berowra was built in 1888 for the local mayor Matthew Charlton. Its twin Budgewoi was demolished in the early 1980s to build the town houses next door.

Proceed up the steps.

The large block of flats Versailles was built around 1920 and named after the French city in which the Treaty between the World War One combatants was signed. Shortly after that war began, in 1914, Lawson wrote the poem ‘Kerosene Bay’ (part of present-day Balls Head Bay in Wollstonecraft) which remarked upon the impounding of German vessels there:

’Tis strange, on such a peaceful day
With white clouds flying o’er,
That foreign boats are in the bay
As prisoners of war.
And we in spite of all they say,
Can’t understand what for…

In 1919 he wrote a short story about the devastating Spanish Influenza that swept the world after World War One and was brought back to Australia by returning service personnel. ‘The Pride of Flu’ was influenced by the community life of Blues Point Road and Euroka Street. It contained the following observation:

We’ve got the ‘flu in our street. It is a good, wide, short, blind street, with the head of a beachy bah at the bottom, and a splendid run for go-carts.
from the top… Occasionally a little boy or girl from the twin-houses runs down to the little street-grocery, closely masked and carefully avoiding contact with lesser and common kiddies. (Smiths Weekly 1919)

**Continue up the stairs to Lavender Street and turn left – walk along until you have a view of Lavender Bay over the pitched roof of a sandstone villa.**

The house below you is Quibree – one of the oldest surviving dwellings in North Sydney. It was built in 1855 for Matthew Charlton. The name derives from the Indigenous word for fresh water spring. It was the first name given to this bay by Europeans – presumably after interaction with the local Cammeraygal people. Lawson apparently stayed here for a time in 1899 for this address appears on a manuscript. He also lived in ‘Strathmere’s Lord Street, in 1899. His poem ‘Above Lavender Bay’, written about 1910, evokes the view from this site:

…To “points” that hint of Italy –
Of Italy and Spain-
I see busy ferry boats
Come nosing round again
To the toy station down below
I see the toy trains run-
(I wonder when those ferry boats
Will get their business done)…

**Continue up towards Blues Point Road.**

**Commodore Hotel**
The present Commodore Hotel occupies the original site of the Billy Blue Inn built in 1848 by John Blue – the son of the famous convict/waterman and namesake for the Peninsular. This hotel was also known as the Commodore Inn, Commodore Tavern or Commodore Hotel. It is quite likely that Henry Lawson drank at the old hotel and its demolition in 1901 may have added to his sense of unease at the vanishing ‘Spirit of North Sydney’.

The new hotel, built by Tooth and Co., was itself demolished and replaced by another in 1938. This survived until 1973 when it, too, was knocked down and replaced by the rather ironically named Old Commodore Tavern. This establishment was extensively rebuilt and extended in 1997. It is now a popular venue for the local residents as well as office workers from the North Sydney CBD.

**Cross Lavender Street at the lights and then cross Blues Point Road. Walk a short way to the right to William Street which extends off at an angle from Blues Point Road.**

Lawson affectionately called William Street, ‘Bill Street’, in the short story ‘The Bath’. In that story he remarked upon the transience and mobility of life in the terraces of North Sydney at the lower end of the social scale:
One thing I could never make is that when one house becomes vacant from a house agent’s point of view… the people of another remove into it. And there’s not the slightest difference between the houses. It is because the removal is such a small affair I suppose, and the change is the main thing. (The Bath, 1908)

Isabel Byers seemed to be on the move constantly with Henry not far behind. She lived in 24 William Street in 1912 and 20 William Street in 1913 and 1914. She also lived in No.22. None of these terrace houses survive but Nos 6-8 William Street give an indication of the streetscape in the early 1900s. Lawson conceived, and possibly wrote, the poem ‘Black Bonnets’ while staying at No. 20. The opening stanza probably refers to a parishioner on her way to nearby St Peter’s Presbyterian Church:

A day of peace and innocence,
A glorious sun and sky,
And, just above my picket fence,
“Black Bonnets” passing by…

The stone seat at the junction of William Street and Blues Point Road was installed in the late 1960s. It is known as the Henry Lawson seat.

Continue back down Blues Point Road and turn right into Union Street. Walk along until you reach the drive way of the Graythwaite Estate.

Union Street has an interesting assortment of mid to late-Victorian-era houses including examples of substantial Victorian-era filigree dwellings. Nos 77- 79, on the corner of Thomas and Union Streets on the opposite side of the street is an unusual example of a pair of semi-detached homes in the Federation Filigree style showing the influence of Art Nouveau – they were probably built in the first decade of 20th century.

Much of the land north of Union Street was part of the Graythwaite Estate. The land on the Graythwaite Estate had originally been bought from the Crown in 1836 by Thomas Walker – after whom Walker Street in North Sydney is named. It was later called the Euroka Estate and the first dwelling on the site was named Euroka Villa. In 1873 the property was purchased for £4500 (around $4 million in today’s terms) by Thomas Allwright Dibbs, Manager of the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney. Thomas Dibbs moved into Euroka Villa in the early 1880s and changed its name to Graythwaite – a reference possibly to a family property in the Lake District of England. However, the first Dibbs to live at Graythwaite was George, who later became Premier of New South Wales.

With its grand Italianate mansion and landscaped grounds it was the most impressive home in North Sydney during Lawson’s stays in the area. The house can be glimpsed from Union Street. The property was the centre of high-society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Then, in 1915, Thomas Dibbs gave the property to the State for use as a convalescent hospital ‘in perpetuity’ for Anzacs and other ‘distressed subjects of the British Empire’. Lawson was living locally when this momentous change occurred.

Nearly a century later the building had become quite decrepit and against considerable community opposition, the Supreme Court overturned Dibbs’ stated intent for the property to be used for convalescence. In 2009 the Church of England Grammar School, ‘Shore’, was permitted to buy the property for $32.5 million.
Graythwaite pictured in the 1890s from the Holtermann tower – then part of Shore School. PF749/6 North Sydney Heritage Centre Collection/Stanton Library.

This school had established a presence next door to Dibbs’ home during Lawson’s residency when it established itself in another grand 19th century – the mansion and grounds of B. O. Holtermann. It was from the tower of his home that the most significant and famous photographic panoramas of Sydney Harbour were taken. Elements of the Holtermann tower survive within the brick clock tower of the school.

**Continue along to No.44.**

**No.44 Union Street** is the house *Kailoa* built in 1885 for the son of Thomas Dibbs of Graythwaite. Shore School bought this property in 1966 and proposed to pull it down to make space for tennis courts in the late 1970s. A Permanent Conservation Order saved the property from demolition. It is now commercial offices.

**Nos 34-40 Union Street** were built as early as 1853. They are among the oldest surviving dwellings in North Sydney and probably the oldest set of terraces. The buildings were called Sayers’ Terrace, (also *Euroka Villas*), after Edwin Mawney Sayers, a wealthy shipping merchant, and owner of the estate before Thomas Dibbs. He planted formal gardens, renamed his grander property *Euroka Villa* and, to recoup costs, subdivided the Union Street frontage of his property and built these four large semi-detached houses using local stone. They were the first permanent dwellings on the street.

**Continue down to Bank Street.**

The large double fronted terraces you are passing, **No.s 20-28**, were built in 1880 by the mariner Captain James Monro. They are called *Euroka Terrace* and were another subdivision of the Euroka Estate.

**Turn right into Banks Street.**

The difference between the size of the dwellings on Union Street to those in Bank Street should be immediately apparent. This area typified the communities of Henry Lawson’s North Sydney. It was a poorer working class neighbourhood through to the years after World War Two. Jean Blundell lived in Riley Street as a young girl during the First World War and recalled the class consciousness that prevailed in her own household:

*It was ingrained upon us not to roam, to go out into the street and you didn’t go down to Bank Street… It was a bit of ‘riff raff’ down around there and they lived in shanties.* (Merle Coppell Oral History Collection, OH100)

Note the wood block frontage of **No.18 Bank Street** – made to look like stone
Henry Lawson died just weeks before the Sydney Harbour Bridge Act was finally passed in 1922. The construction that followed from 1924 brought upheaval and turmoil to the communities that lay in the path of the Bridge and the new rail line that linked it to Waverton Station. The tunnel to your right goes underneath the Graythwaite Estate. The track to the left, however, was built upon heavily settled streets – dozens of houses were demolished.

**Walk down the stairs to Euroka Street**

Just to the right of the steps is a plaque recording Lawson’s residency in five Euroka Street houses – Nos 21, 26, 28, 30 and 31 – all of which still stand. Isabel Byers lived in 30 and 31 in 1915 and 1916 respectively and presumably Lawson was there with her at these times. Houses at 15, 17 and 19 were demolished to make way for the rail line in the mid-1920s. Euroka Street seems to have had a large population of children for Lawson was inspired to write the short story ‘Kiddies’ Land’ while living here:

‘...Our Street is an asphalted street,
And, when the school-day’s done,
You hear the sounds of little feet,
And little go-carts run… (Kiddies’ Land 1915)

After exploring this short stretch of Euroka St up to No.31 cross over, walk back down crossing Carr and Woolcott Streets carefully. Walk along to Commodore Crescent and follow the roadway under the 1893 rail line that was made somewhat redundant by the new Harbour Bridge connection.

Proceed to the terraced parkland below. The stone stairs here are called the ‘Henry Lawson Steps’. Be especially careful when negotiating the stairs and the ground below as there are no hand-rails.

This is the site of *Ivycliff*, one of the most picturesque ‘marine villas’ to have graced the North Sydney foreshores. It was home to Charles Woolcott (after whom Woolcott Street is named) who was the first Town Clerk of Sydney from 1857 to 1887. *Ivycliff* had superb views of Berrys Bay and was itself very visible from the Bay. Woolcott lived here until his death in 1905.

Sometime soon after 1905 the radical ‘free thinker’ William Chidley lived here. Lawson must have been aware of Chidley, if not personally acquainted, for the former was a notorious
participant at the well-attended ‘Speakers’ Corner’ in the Sydney Domain – a favourite haunt of Lawson. There Chidley spoke candidly about the sexual relations between men and women while wearing a toga-style costume. Despite the utopian and conciliatory tenor of his message, he offended many in respectable Edwardian-era Sydney, as he apparently did in North Sydney when he sunbathed in the nude in full view of passing train passengers. Chidley did have supporters and they defended him after he was declared insane in 1916 and committed to Kenmore Mental Hospital in Goulburn. Chidley died in Callan Park Mental Hospital later that year.

The Cunningham family moved to Ivycliff after Chidley was asked to leave. Helen Cunningham recalled as a child seeing Henry Lawson striding down the local streets quoting poetry while drunk: ‘We used to run away from him’. (Ivycliff Vertical File, North Sydney Heritage Centre/Stanton Library)

Small stone steps will take you down to the terraces. Look across to the old house on the right.

This building is popularly known as ‘Rob’s Cottage’ – so-named after a dog that used to live there with its owner. It was built in 1883 by stonemason Thomas Cronshaw. The house is unusual in that for many years it has had no street access.

Head back across the terrace to the dirt track which will take you down to the end of John Street and the entrance to Waverton Park.

Berrys Bay was the site of several boatbuilding businesses and around Blues Point, the huge Eatons timber yard. This playing field was created in the 1940s. It is built on what used to be a tidal flat fed by a creek. Most of North Sydney’s bays in the late 1800s were mudflats of this type. ‘Reclaiming’ the foreshore for parkland or development was seen as an improvement.

Ivycliff is visible in the centre and ‘Rob’s Cottage’ on the left in this view of Berrys Bay in the late 1890s. North Sydney Heritage Centre Collection/Stanton Library, PF663

This mid-1880s view shows Berrys Bay from above the tidal flat that was filled in to create the present-day playing field. North Sydney Heritage Centre Collection/Stanton Library, PF144
Walk across the playing field to the steps and proceed up to the first pathway. There is a men’s and women’s toilet block here.

There are two options available for the last leg of the walk.

1. The shortest way to proceed is straight to the coal loader via the small stone steps to the left of the toilets. These will take you to Larkin Street.

2. Alternatively you can head to the left along this path to explore the former site of the BP oil terminal, now called Carradah Park. Signage will give you a further outline of the history of site. Use the wayfinding signs to finish up at Larkin Street above the park.

Oil storage on this site specifically dates to 1923 – the year after Lawson died. Then the Anglo-Persian Oil Company built their first tank here. Use of the site intensified throughout the 20th century until 1994 when BP operations ceased. It was given to North Sydney Council by the NSW Government for public parkland in 1997.

From Larkin Street walk up Wood Street to Balls Head Road. Turn left and cross carefully and head down alongside the first road opposite. This will take you past an Aboriginal rock carving and the coal loader utility buildings. Walk along to the large entrance down to the coal loader platform, taking care to watch for vehicles.

Aboriginal carving
The Aboriginal rock carving here dates back before European colonisation. Undoubtedly a significant place for the Cammeraygal people who lived in this area, the carving may represent a whale and a human figure – a ‘clever man’ – who is singing the creature into the harbour. A small set of fish was covered by the construction of the coal loader access road around 1918. Henry Lawson loved Balls Head – a ‘short walk before breakfast’ – and referred to the carving in his first poem ‘Balls Head’:

‘...Here are the cliffs of the ocean
Facing south and the dawn
And the gnarled old trees of the ages
And the rocks that blacks writ on…’

Coal loader
The extent of the huge coal loader platform is best appreciated from the water or from Berry Island to the west (the public will be better able to explore the site and its tunnels in mid-2011). The land on this side of Balls Head was leased to the Sydney Coal Bunkering Company in 1913 and the facility completed between 1917 and 1920. It was one of the most advanced methods of coaling in Sydney Harbour and dispensed with the need for ‘coal lumpers’ to shovel fuel from colliers to receiving steamers while out in the Harbour.

Colliers were unloaded by electric gantry cranes and the coal piled onto the platform to the south. Chutes opened to release the coal into hoppers waiting in the tunnels below. These travelled by rail out to the ships docked alongside the long wharf. The facility was used to fuel coal-burning steamers until 1964 – well into the age of the motor ship. It was unused for a decade and then between 1974 and 1992 it was refurbished and recommissioned as a coal export facility.
This photograph shows the seawall of the coal loader platform with the gantry on the left and a collier docked shortly after the facility was completed for the Sydney Coal Bunkering Company. Copyright Coal and Allied Industries. North Sydney Heritage Centre Collection/ Stanton Library PF1234/13

Around 1917 Henry Lawson attacked the proposed coal loader in a poem called ‘The Sacrifice of Balls Head’. It sounded one of the earliest environmental protests around the harbour and presented a passionate defence of the rights of ‘harbour people’ to public space and amenity – more than 50 years before the Green Bans saved ‘the Rocks’:

‘They’re taking it, the shipping push,
As all the rest must go –
The only spot of cliff and bush
That harbour people know.
The spirit of the past is dead,
North Sydney has no soul –
The State is cutting down Ball’s Head
To make a wharf for coal…

Lawson died of a brain haemorrhage at Abbotsford – further west up the Parramatta River– in 1922. He was given a state funeral and statue was erected in his memory in the Domain above the Harbour he loved.

Four years later, in 1926, the State did reserve the remainder of Balls Head back for the people as public parkland. Henry Lawson’s brother-in-law, Premier Jack Lang, presided over the ceremony. The stone he laid can be seen a short distance up Balls Head Drive.

_This concludes the walk. Balls Head Drive continues to the south as a loop through Balls Head Reserve. For buses and trains proceed back north up Balls Head Road to Bay Road._

_Further reading_

Most of the poetry and prose quoted above is collated by Olive Lawson in _Henry Lawson’s North Sydney_, North Shore Historical Society, Cammeray, 1999.


_These walking tour notes were compiled by the Historical Services team in September 2010 from resources held in the North Sydney Heritage Centre, Stanton Library. Ph: 99368400_