Introduction
North Sydney Olympic Pool is both a national icon and a local landmark. Eighty-six world records were broken there, most by the elite of Australia’s postwar competitive swimmers from Murray Rose in 1956 to Shane Gould in 1972. Its significance in Australian sporting history can hardly be overemphasized. That said, the Pool has an enduring place in the lives and memories of thousands of people who learnt to swim there, participated in school carnivals there and, indeed, continue do their regular laps there. It is a special Sydney spot and one of North Sydney’s defining places.

To understand the Pool’s history, it helps to appreciate the connection between the site and the local area - Milsons Point – before and when the Pool was built in 1936. This walking tour will explore this fascinating link while also examining the profound changes that transformed this part of North Sydney in from the 1890s to the 1930s.

The walk begins at the Alfred Street entrance of North Sydney Olympic Pool. (To view the interior of the pool is not covered in this tour. However you can pay for spectator entry at the gate and explore the interior. A series of panels in the ‘Hall of Fame’ outlines the history of pool. The World Record Board, installed in the 1950s, contains the details of the major swims.)

View of Milsons Point from the Sydney Harbour Bridge, showing the North Sydney Olympic Pool, Luna Park and the rail line that operated before the Bridge opened in 1932, [late 1930s]. Photograph, Stanton Library.
Our walk begins at the entrance to the pool on Alfred Street.

North Sydney Olympic Pool

The North Sydney Olympic Pool, as it stands today, owes its existence to the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Had the Bridge not been built, the foreshore land here at Milsons Point would not have become available for North Sydney Council to develop as a ‘state of the art’ pool. Indeed it might well have ended up in St Leonards Park, one of the locations suggested in 1933.

The pool was designed by the architectural firm Rudder and Grout. Though it is sometimes described as ‘Art Deco’, the the façade is better characterised as an example of the stylised classicism that was internationally popular in the years between the world wars. Much civic architecture in the United States was designed in this style as, indeed, was Albert Speer’s work in Nazi Germany. This architecture used elements of classicism such as columns, loggia, geometric often stepped shapes and symmetry. Often classical form was ‘stripped’ or simplified in keeping with ideas of Modernism.

The Pool design may have been inspired by the pylons of the Sydney Harbour Bridge completed in 1932. Look up at the Bridge from the original Pool entry and you will see the similarity in design.

Creating ideal Australians. Competition at the Pool opening 4th April 1936. Stanton Library

Just as the Pool facade references the style and tone of the Bridge, which is unquestionably awe-inspiring and serious, the Pool, too, had a serious civic function as a place of sport which produced a strong, healthy populace.
In the wake of the First World War, and as tensions between countries grew again in the 1930s, there was great emphasis on national identity and the fostering of the ideal citizen. As North Sydney Alderman McLeod Bolton put it when promoting the Pool in 1937: ‘There exists no place in the world today for a C3 [militarily unfit] nation’. Crystal clear, filtered water was a feature of the facility.

But the North Sydney Olympic Pool did, and still does, have a playful side. And this, too, was reflected in the design. The multi-coloured brickwork and the animal friezes add a light-heartedness to the classical elements. Note the frogs looking down from the entrance. We will discover more about this shortly.

The present-day Pool office, turnstiles and the 25 metre pool beyond were built in 2001. In 1936 you entered and exited the Pool below the inset sign in front of you.

The entrance fronted a walkway called Olympic Place that joined Alfred Street to Northcliffe and Paul Streets which still run still behind.

And before the construction of the Bridge, this was also the junction of Alfred Street and Western Wharf Road which curved around a steep cliff face to the western side of Milsons Point where the North Shore Ferry Company had its coaling wharf. That was about where the 50 metre pool is today.

WALK ALONG THE FORESHORE PAST THE POOL TOWARDS THE LUNA PARK ENTRANCE FACE

Walking beside the Pool allows you to appreciate its relationship to the two iconic sites on either side. On the right is the sublime Bridge and on the left are the fantastical, funny structures of Luna Park. The Pool’s combination of arches, which reference the loggia of classical spaces, with whimsical seagull and swordfish friezes, works perfectly between these two places.

This photograph shows the Pool and the Park in the 1940s. It was not until the early 1960s that the dour entrance face was replaced with the smiling visage that has carried on to the present-day entry. Stanton Library

Luna Park loggia, 2016, Stanton Library

Again, as the amusement park predated the Pool by a year, one wonders whether Rudder and Grout intentionally included these light-hearted elements in order to reflect the space between the Bridge and the Park. It might be said that the Pool sits somewhere between the sublime and the ridiculous.

There have been some changes. Though the arches were always glazed, the concave bays were installed in the 1980s. The animal friezes were originally white, another reference to classicism. They were painted in the 1980s.

WALK TO THE ENTRANCE OF THE LUNA PARK

The current smiling face of Luna Park follows the design introduced by Park artist Arthur Barton in the late 1950s. Before this the entrance had a rather dour, frightening visage. In fact this better reflected the deep cultural roots of the amusement park in the landscaped private parks and estates of Britain and Europe as a place that combined ‘terror’, or at least awe, with pleasure. The 16th century sculpture garden of Bomarzo in Italy has both a monstrous mouth of Orcus of the underworld to enter and hear echoes within, and a leaning tower which anticipated the lopsided and disorientating Goofy House, one of the original
attractions at Luna Park. The other important influence on amusement parks such as this one was the tradition of carnival which again had deep roots in European culture. At carnivals or on carnival days social convention was set typically aside. So it was at Luna Park where decorum, still strict in Australia through to the 1950s, was upended on rides that thrilled, terrified and sent skirts flapping up around the ears of ‘young ladies’.

**Walk to the Top of the Stairs to the Right of the Face**

These are the original stairs behind the Pool. They connected the Park with the rear entrance of the Pool. Olympic Place ran behind the grandstand to the entrance where you began the walk. Most of the block has been filled by the 25 metre pool.

**Head Right Down Paul Street to Alfred Street**

This small park is officially named Hopkins Park after Ted Hopkins, the maintenance engineer for Luna Park from 1935 to 197, when the 25 metre pool was completed. It was formerly the site of one of the oldest pubs in North Sydney. ‘The Lily of St Leonards’ stood here from as early as 1873. It was called the Imperial Hotel by 1936.

Run by RE Smith in 1873, the hotel was owned by the Waterhouse family by the end of the 1800s. That family’s connections with North Sydney date from the early days of settlement on the north shore. Two members of the family were aldermen on North Sydney Council and the reserve on the Kirribilli side of the harbour is named in honour of Captain Henry Waterhouse who arrived with the First Fleet in 1788 and later commanded HMS Reliance.

This lower section of Alfred Street accommodated four pubs before the building of the Bridge: ‘The Imperial Hotel’, ‘The Rest Hotel’, ‘Dinds Hotel’ and the ‘Milsons Point Hotel’. The latter two were demolished to make way for the Bridge. When the licensee of the Milsons Point Hotel applied to transfer the license to a site in Alfred Street, the application was denied on the basis of there being adequate pubs in the area.
been designed in the 1930s. Stanton Library

The State Government resumed the Imperial in 1946. The Waterhouses moved their license to Chatswood. The Rest Hotel survived until the 1980s when it was demolished to make way for an office building.

While the coming of high rise development and the shifting demographics of the area from the 1970s radically transformed Alfred Street, the impact of the Sydney Harbour Bridge was no less profound. In 1997 Bill Waterhouse recalled the local hotels and the impact of the Bridge which decimated local business because of the extent of demolition and undermined the ferry trade:

[They were] very very busy - initially from the ferries then the Bridge workers... I remember the hotel was just completely busy the whole time. And overnight the Bridge opened and overnight the hotel was empty. The whole trade just disappeared... from being packed it was just like a ghost town... (Down the Bay: The Changing Foreshores of North Sydney, North Sydney Council, 1997)

FROM THIS POSITION YOU CAN APPRECIATE THE CHANGES WROUGHT BY THE SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE. BRADFIEL PARK OPPOSITE WAS ONCE DENSELY PACKED STREETS AND LANES WHICH WERE LINED WITH TERRACE HOUSING. LOOK DOWN TO THE FORESHORE IN FRONT OF THE PYLON. THIS WAS THE SITE OF ONE OF THE HARBOUR’S ICONIC STRUCTURES, THE MILSONS POINT FERRY ARCADE PAINTED BY TOM ROBERTS IN 1890 AND SKETCHED AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY MANY OTHER ARTISTS

Milsons Point took over from Blues Point as the main ferry stop for the North Shore in the 1860s. The Ferry Arcade was built by the North Shore Ferry Company in 1887, a year after the cable tram to the existing ferry wharf was completed.

This photograph shows the Ferry Arcade around 1920. Its importance as a transport hub is clear with the tram terminal within and train station on the right. Stanton Library

The first Milsons Point train station opened there in 1893 when the Hornsby to St.Leonards line was extended through Wollstonecraft and Waverton, around Lavender Bay to the Milsons Point Ferry Arcade. The station was moved back along the waterfront in 1915 when it seemed that there was agreement to build a harbour bridge which would necessitate demolishing the Ferry Arcade. However, complaints from commuters having to walk the extra distance between the new station and the ferry led to the station’s return to its original site after just seven weeks. In any case the ‘Sydney Harbour Bridge Bill’ was narrowly defeated in 1916 because of patriotic concerns that expenditure be directed at fighting Germany in the Great War. A second Bill was finally passed in 1922 and, in 1924, Milsons Point Station was moved a third time back around Lavender Bay to make room for the Bridge workshops operated by Dorman Long. As the waterfront was now blocked by workshops, a set of escalators, Sydney’s first, were installed to transport passengers up the escarpment a short distance from here in Dind Street:
There were escalators to go down to the ferry wharf, probably the first escalators I’d seen… So we’d get off the tram and down the escalators to the wharf and into town. It was a lovely trip into town.

Allan Willoughby, Oral History Interview 1996

When the Sydney Harbour Bridge opened, the old Lavender Bay train line was redundant and Milsons Point Station was located in its present site as part of the Bridge.

HEAD NORTH ALONG ALFRED STREET UNTIL YOU GET TO A ROW OF TERRACE HOUSES FROM 22 ALFRED STREET

These terrace houses are all that remain of Alfred Street’s pre-Bridge residential street face. Nos 22 to 26a were built by Johannes Grannes in 1901. The brick and timber detailing is typical of Federation-era architecture – Australia’s colonies came together as a federation in 1901 - but not of most of North Sydney’s terrace housing which was built in the 1880s and 1890s and often featured filigree ironwork and rendered exteriors. Nos 26 and 28 were built in 1895 in a grander Italianate-style though they have been much altered. Like most houses in North Sydney at this time they were leased rather than owner-occupied. Renters received no compensation when they were forced to leave during the Bridge resumptions.

CONTINUE UP ALFRED STREET TO DIND STREET

The coloured footings on either side of the street are the remains of the Luna Park arch that once greeted visitors walking down from Milsons Point station. The northern face of the arch originally read: ‘Entrance Luna Park and Olympic Pool’. The southern side read: Entrance Luna Park Just for Fun Car Park’. A hand pointed over to Bradfield Park where 1,000 car spaces were made available on the grass by North Sydney Council. The sign and the parking were gestures of appreciation by Council for the construction of Luna Park had employed more than 1,000 men, many of them local, during the Great Depression. In the 1980s Mayor Ted Mack changed the text on the south side to read: ‘Welcome to North Sydney’ as Luna Park was no longer operating (a fire in 1979 led to the closure of the park until 1996). The arch was largely demolished in 2006 because of concrete ‘cancer’ and the presence of asbestos. A replica is scheduled to be reinstated in 2016.

CONTINUE NORTH TO MILSON’S VILLAGE SHOPPING PRECINCT, 50—56 ALFRED STREET. WALK INTO THE SPACE WITHIN THE HIGH RISE BLOCKS

Camden Villa can be seen here, marked by an arrow, in its ridge top location. The Milsons Point Ferry arcade is visible at the far right. This detail is from a 1893 panorama by the Government Photographer, Mitchell Library

The two storey sandstone building you can see here is Camden Villa. Built in 1864, it is one of the oldest surviving structures in North Sydney.

Camden Villa is an important remnant of mid-19th century residential development. Before the construction of high-rise buildings, it was one of the prominent structures on the rise above
Lavender Bay with views up and down the Harbour. The house was designed in the rather old fashioned Victorian Regency style which still appealed to those who preferred simple refinement rather than Gothic or more ostentatious Victorian-era styles. It was completed soon after the subdivision of the Campbell estate that once covered occupied much of Milsons Point. The villa was probably built for or by James Bray, who occupied it until 1868. Subsequent tenants included Paul Talbot, wool broker, and Captain Farquhar of the P. & O. Company. In 1908 it was acquired by John Frey and converted to flats – one of the earliest examples of such a conversion in Sydney. Camden Villa stayed in the family until 1951. Thereafter it fell into disrepair as high-rise buildings began to replace the old Alfred Street houses and shops. It may have been painted at this time. Originally its picked sandstone would have been left exposed.

Camden Villa sits on original sandstone bedrock as the area around is excavated for below ground car parking and foundations. Photograph by Robert McDonnell, Stanton Library

Camden Villa was included in North Sydney Council’s first Heritage Inventory in 1980 but in the 1980s the building was threatened by development. North Sydney Council permitted the construction of the surrounding buildings on the condition that the building be preserved and restored. Its retention in 1986 was an extraordinary engineering feat. However, despite the saving of this important house, some have questioned the effectiveness of this heritage outcome. The villa’s visual relationship to the harbour has been lost and is completely overshadowed by the surround tower blocks.

CONTINUE NORTH UP ALFRED STREET TO THE CORNER OF GLEN STREET

The former North Sydney Town Hall in the 1940s. Stanton Library

This was the site of the East St Leonards Town Hall. Before North Sydney Council was formed in 1890, three Boroughs governed the area. The building continued as the Town Hall until the 1920s. The Turret Theatre operated here from 1928 to 1930 and thereby acquired their name because of the distinctive feature which tailored the building to its triangular site. The building was demolished in 1968.

CROSS GLEN STREET TO THE OPPOSITE CORNER, 83 ALFRED STREET
This was the site of the Rest Hotel, discussed earlier. The building that replaced the Rest was a commercial building that was, in turn, refurbished as a boutique residential hotel called The Vibe. This is currently being redeveloped and ‘reskinned’, whereby much of the structure is kept, as apartments. Several of Alfred Street’s commercial buildings have been redeveloped in this way for residential use, an indication of the profitability of the Sydney property market.

CONTINUE NORTH UNTIL YOU ARRIVE AT THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AT 100 ALFRED STREET

This beautiful church was built between 1883 and 1888 and replaced the first Congregational Church which had been operating from 1863 in Pitt Street, Kirribilli. It was designed in the Victorian Free Gothic style by H.S. Thompson who had before and subsequently designed a number of Congregational Churches including those at Croydon and Strathfield. In the late 1960s members of the Chinese Christian Church, who were in need of premises to worship, were welcomed at the church. As with St John the Baptist church, in nearby Broughton Street Kirribilli, the traditional congregation had dwindled. The Chinese church bought the premises and built additional Sunday school facilities at the back. Today it has a huge congregation made up of Chinese immigrants and students from many countries. Services are held in English, Cantonese and Mandarin. The Church has served as the base for the establishment of other Evangelical Chinese congregations in the western suburbs.

It was once possible to see the spire of the Congregation Church from Careening Cove to the east as Willoughby Street once ran down the hill from this location on Alfred Street. That street and the vista was blocked the Bridge approach.

CONTINUE UP ALFRED STREET TO THE ROUNDABOUT AND CROSS TO BRADFIELD PARK

Bradfield Park looking north from Milsons Point Station in 1936. Photograph by Robin Cale, Stanton Library

Bradfield Park was named after JJC Bradfield, Chief Engineer for the Bridge and Railways, who played a pivotal role in the development of the Bridge. He was involved in tree planting ceremonies here between 1924 and 1930. There were grand plans for large civic spaces and plazas after the Bridge’s completion. The planting of Bradfield Park was the rather modest realisation of civic improvement designs.

The park was created out of the land left vacant after properties on the east side of Alfred Street were demolished and the Bridge approach completed. As many as 500 businesses and homes were resumed – forcibly acquired – and demolished in North Sydney to build the Bridge and the road and rail approaches to it. Those who owned property were compensated after official valuations were carried out. Some renters and leaseholders may have received the balance of rents paid but no compensation for
inconvenience or goodwill built up over years of business. While their plight was noted in the press and Council attempted to get some compensation for hardship there was no protest.

There were certainly no uprisings and there were certainly no demonstrations that I recall - it was something that happened... people might not have had much say in matters in those days. It was a question of ‘do as your told’ or else... [the businesses] moved further north and would have amalgamated or got involved with people in Mount Street and those places... The Harpers, our neighbours, had a wood joinery shop in Alfred Street and one of their specialities were making crosses and crucifixes to go on coffins and we used to get the rejects.

Victor Wills, Oral History Interview, (OH /138)

The resumptions and demolitions destroyed the commercial life of Alfred Street. Businesses fared better at Crows Nest further up the Lane Cove Road – renamed the Pacific Highway – as the Bridge created a corridor of traffic that bypassed the once-busy thoroughfare and transport hub.

North Sydney Council has been the custodian of the park since 1932. The Lombardy Poplars are thought to have been planted around 1934, despite Bradfield’s preference for native trees. The Jessie Broomfield memorial fountain was added in 1953 for use by pedestrians and their canine friends.

CONTINUE DOWN BRADFIELD PARK TO MILSONS POINT STATION. ILLUSTRATED SIGNS ALONG THE WAY TELL THE STORY OF THE BRIDGE RESUMPTIONS. SANDSTONE BLOCKS OUTLINE SOME OF THE ORIGINAL BUILDING FOOTINGS. NOTE THE LOCATION OF WILLOUGHBY MARKED BY STONE OPPOSITE THE

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

This photograph shows 69-73 Alfred Street, demolished to build the Bridge. State Library of NSW

THIS CONCLUDES THE WALKING TOUR. BELOW IS MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE NORTH SYDNEY OLYMPIC POOL

The Pool was designed by architects Rudder and Grout. In conjunction with engineers, Morrison and Little and the builders, Kell and Rigby, it was completed in 32 weeks at a final cost of 47,000 pounds.

The Pool continued the tradition of competitive swimming at Lavender Bay begun in the early 1880s when the ex-Royal Navy and champion swimmer, Frederick Cavill, opened his ‘natatorium’ or floating baths and set himself up as a professor of swimming. All of Frederick Cavill’s children became champion swimmers, the most famous being Dick Cavill who was born next to the baths, remembered for developing the ‘crawl’ stroke. A two storey wooden building housing baths that boasted three diving boards, two showers, change rooms, a refreshment saloon and club rooms was built in 1905. By the mid 1930s, the baths were in need of repair and showing signs of its
age. It was thought that the Olympic Pool would replace them but while attendance did decline, many local residents still preferred the old baths to the modernity of the inland pool. The wooden baths were demolished in the mid-1970s.

The new ‘Wonder Pool’ hosted the 3rd Empire Games from 5 to 12 February 1938 for 15 countries and a total of 466 athletes. In swimming and diving Australia won all of the five women’s events staged for the Games. Many records were broken and made in the North Sydney Olympic Pool throughout its time as a premier swimming competition venue. Bill Phillips was interviewed for Stanton Library’s Oral History Collection and he recalled his involvement with the Empire Games:

*My father was one of the judges for the 1938 Games, I was an announcer… it was the first time we ever had any big competition in Australia, except cricket… every seat was sold ages and ages before… you just couldn’t get in the swimming pool at North Sydney, it was completely sold out. They were even looking over from the railing on the Bridge.*

William (Bill) Berge Phillips, Oral History Interview, 1997

Bill Phillips began his swimming official career in the 1940s and was a delegate to the Australian Olympic Federation. He officiated at 13 Olympic Games and was entered into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1997.

Prior to the staging of the Empire Games swimming events, the Pool was the surprise venue for a pearl diving film – Lovers and Luggers (1937), complete with a construction of a movie on the bottom of the Pool.

The Pool has attracted swimmers from all over North Sydney and beyond, competition and recreational swimmers alike. It has been the home to the North Sydney Amateur Swimming Club since the Empire Games. The Club’s popular ‘learn to swim’ programs and competition events have opened up the sport of swimming to millions of people throughout its history which began at the Lavender Bay Baths in the 1890s. The Pool has also been the home of many school swimming carnivals and 86 world records. Some of the more well-known swimmers who made their mark in the North Sydney Olympic Pool include: Judy Joy Davies, Frank O’Neill, Murray Rose, John and Ilza Konrads, Lorraine Crapp, Dawn Fraser, Shane Gould, Michelle Ford, amongst others. (See the ‘Hall of Fame’ Record Board and interpretative panels in the ground floor of the Pool for details)

In 1997 North Sydney Council held an architectural competition to redevelop North Sydney Olympic Pool. The decision to hold an architectural design competition was the result of a two-year community consultation process beginning in 1995 which arose out of community concern over the deteriorating state of the Pool. The competition aimed to transform the Pool into a state-of-the-art aquatic facility which would also be respectful of the Pool’s history, traditions and style. The competition provided a stimulating challenge for some of the finest architectural minds in Australia, with over fifty entries received. The winning design by Hassell Architects was the unanimous choice of the competition’s judges, who included community representatives, North Sydney councillors and architects. The competition was supervised by Graham Jahn, an authority on twentieth century. The competition was later awarded the inaugural NSW Premier’s Award for Architecture, presented by the Premier, The Hon. Bob Carr MP, ‘in recognition of the competition’s structure emphasising design ideas, design development, community consultation and anonymity and fairness towards entrants’.

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The redeveloped Olympic Pool was opened on 26 January 2001 by Cr Genia McCaffery, Mayor of North Sydney and features:

- a 25 metre indoor pool
- a splash pool
- a renovated cafe and new restaurant seating 130
- childcare facilities
- a gymnasium
- picnic and sunbathing areas
- energy-efficient solar heating and hot water heat pumps

The new Pool was built by Hansen Yuncken Pty Ltd. and the Sustainable Energy Development Authority (SEDA) contributed $400,000 towards the cost of installing the heating system, making North Sydney Olympic Pool one of the largest public buildings in Sydney to utilise energy-efficient methods of heating.

In 2015 North Sydney Council commissioned several design options for the refurbishment of the Pool and sought public input on the suitability of the schemes. The need to do so has been prompted by changing local demographics, ongoing demands for a more contemporary aquatic centre and the pressing problems of maintenance of a much-loved structure that is 80 years old.

Further reading

Down the Bay the Changing Foreshores of North Sydney, (1997),
Sam Marshall, Luna Park Just for Fun, (2005)
Mandy Jean et al, North Sydney Olympic Pool: Conservation Plan, 1994

More information can be found online through the North Sydney Heritage Centre pages via Stanton Library on the North Sydney Council website, www.northsydney.nsw.gov.au

Or visit the Centre 1-5pm Mon-Sat at the Stanton Library to access the Stanton Library’s Local Studies Collection and the Merle Coppell Oral History Collection

These walking tour notes were compiled in 2016 to mark the 80th anniversary of the North Sydney Olympic Pool

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