

Bronte

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There is no clear evidence for the name or names of the particular bands of the Eora people who lived in what is now the Waverley area. Most sources agree on the Cadigal, but some sources name the Biddigal and Birrabirragal bands as well.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, land in the eastern suburbs of Sydney was given to settlers as free grants. Governor Phillip had been instructed to grant land to ‘deserving emancipated convicts’ and ‘soldiers of the Marine Corps’ from 1789. The free grants ceased in 1831, and in 1836 William Mortimer Lewis, New South Wales Colonial Architect, became the first to purchase land at Nelson Bay, later known as Bronte.

Bronte House

Lewis paid £144 for 12 acres (4.8 hectares) which included the pristine beach flanked by a secluded valley and the land where Bronte House now stands. Subsequent purchases increased his holding to 42 acres (17 hectares) – about twice the size of the present parklands. The property was roughly triangular in shape, having the beachfront as its base and the apex at the junction of present-day Bronte Road and Murray Street.

Lewis began to build a home, but after laying the foundations ran into financial difficulties and was forced to sell the property. Robert Lowe, an Oxford graduate and a barrister, bought the foundations and the surrounding land for £420 in 1843, 12 months after he and his wife arrived in Australia from England. They completed the building two years later, and it became an immediate landmark in the district. Its style – gothic, yet Georgian – was admired as much by the early settlers as by those in modern times. The building later became known as Bronte House.

The Lowe house was a popular gathering place for a number of Sydney intellectuals and statesmen of the time, among them William Macleay, Sir Alfred Stephen, Sir Thomas Mitchell and the governor, Sir George Gipps.

Lowe and his wife left Sydney and returned to England in January 1850, but the estate was not sold until 1853, and in the following eight years the house and land changed hands four times. A *Sydney Morning Herald* advertisement on 5 October 1857 described the property as the ‘Bronte Estate’. Bronte House underwent a major alteration around 1880 when its owners, the Holdsworth family, added a second story to the southern wing fronting Bronte Road. The name ‘Bronte’ can still be seen high on the wall of the wing. In 1882 the estate was offered for sale as a subdivision.

Naming Bronte

There remains some confusion over the origin of the name ‘Bronte’ given to the estate. Some are of the opinion that it was named by Robert Lowe. Lowe had a great passion for literature, and his family were close associates with the literary geniuses of the period, including the Bronte sisters. The sisters died in 1848–49, and many felt Lowe chose to commemorate them by naming the estate in their honour.

The more plausible – and more accepted – explanation, however, is the association with the famous British admiral from whom Nelson Bay took its name. Lord Nelson was created Duke of Bronte by the King of Naples in 1799. The earliest reference to ‘Nelson Bay’ can be found on plans of the original grants, and in October 1860, a *Sydney Mail* article, entitled ‘Rambles in Waverley’, commented:

One portion of Waverley has been made commemorative of the great naval hero of Britannia, there is Nelson Bay, Nelson Road, Trafalgar Road and others to remind us of the one-armed warrior of the waves. The Englishmen of Waverley have felt the call of the old sailor in the duty they have performed on commemorating his name.

The others referred to are Collingwood Street, Hardy Street (now Tipper Ave) and Pembroke Street. These days Nelson Road is Bronte Road, Trafalgar Road is Trafalgar Street and Nelson Avenue runs down by Bronte Beach. The name Nelson Bay survives on all official maps – even into the third millennium.

Public recreation

The establishment of a park for public recreation at Bronte had its origin in a deputation from the Municipal Council of Waverley to the Surveyor-General in 1863. The deputation was concerned with a proposed road through the estate of JB Holdsworth. In reply, the Surveyor-General said that a reservation was provided for in the grant at Bronte for a road to the beach where a 100-foot (30.4-metre) reservation already existed.

Apparently Holdsworth tried to purchase this reservation, because in 1864 the council again protested to the Minister for Lands about Holdsworth’s intentions. The colonial government was asked to place the reserve under the control of the council, for public recreation and sea bathing. This appears to be the first reference to a reserve for sea bathing by Waverley Council – or perhaps by any municipal council.

The public reserve issue was raised again by the council in 1885 and also in the Legislative Assembly in 1886, resulting in the Governor granting approval on 21 September 1886 for the resumption of 14 acres (5.6 hectares) for public recreation. The council was appointed trustee of Bronte Park and, among the early improvements, they fenced the area. Further additions were made in the early 1920s, and in 1927 the area along the creek in the gully was given to the council

by the owners, the Ebsworth family. In recognition of this generous gift the gully was named Ebsworth Glen. Over the years the area has been referred to as a valley, glen or dell – but to the locals it has always been ‘the gully’.

Surf bathing

Before resumption, the beach, being private property, was not available to the public but the locals couldn’t resist the lure of the waves. It appears that ‘skinny dipping’ might have been popular at the secluded beach, for a letter to council in January 1886 requested action be taken, ‘compelling bathers at Bronte Beach to adopt some suitable costume’. Perhaps these bathers were simply unsuitably attired, but complaints had already been made about nude bathers at Bondi and Tamarama, so why not Bronte?

At the southern end of the beach was a large ‘bogey hole’, the name derived from an Aboriginal word for swimming or bathing place. In 1887 it was enlarged and a sea wall built to form the Bronte Baths. It is believed that the Australian crawl was first seen at the baths in 1899. During 1904 and 1905 the adjacent rocks were cleared to form the ‘Men’s Bogey’ and linked to the baths by a set of steps. The current Bogey Hole was formed around 1911, and remains one of the beach’s attractions.

Criticism of surf bathing and its effect on picnickers at Bronte reached the popular press in December 1906. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a ‘Picnicker’ complained

that latterly the pretty little beach at Bronte has become invaded by surf bathers ... It is a great shame if one of the prettiest beaches about Sydney (if the most treacherous for bathers) is rendered unavailable for women and children by this wanton desecration. There are no dressing sheds there, and consequently the decencies cannot be adequately preserved.

Bronte Park was also proving a popular spot for picnics, and as early as 1911 Waverley Council built picnic huts on the flat and later on the hill at the southern end of the beach. The huts were rebuilt over the years, including some concrete versions which spoil the character of the park.

Subdivision and development

The early land grants and purchases saw the establishment of many large estates in the area, similar to the Bronte Estate. Chesterfield, Yanko, Palmerstone, Lugar Brae and Arden Vale were other estates, which are remembered by the names of local streets. Eventually the estates were subdivided and sold for housing.

In 1859 the newly formed Waverley Council formally gave Charing Cross its name. It appears that the council had intended Charing Cross to be the principal ‘township’ of the municipality, since it was developed as a village distinct from Bondi Junction, which was known then as Tea Gardens. The area at the time was principally scrubland with few houses and little development,

and the road between the two locations was likened to a rough country road, with few houses and no shops. Tea Gardens itself was a collection of a few shops along the road from the city – and remained so for a long time.

Buses and trams

The introduction of public transport from the city to Waverley's beaches and headlands, and to Waverley Cemetery, as well as to attractions such as the Aquarium at Tamarama and later, Wonderland City (a fun park), inspired the growth of the area.

The first sources of transport were horse-drawn buses, which were used before steam trams began in the 1880s. The tram from the city had originally terminated at Ocean Street, Woollahra, and in 1881 the line was extended to Charing Cross where the terminal was known as the Waverley Terminus. This extension supported the council's proposition that Charing Cross was to be the commercial centre of Waverley. This changed when a line from Tea Gardens to Fletcher Street, Bondi was built in May 1884. This line formed the 'junction', effectively beginning the new commercial centre. There is evidence that suggests that horse-drawn buses took people from the Waverley Terminus to Bronte Beach.

The Bondi Aquarium at Tamarama was serviced by an extension opened in October 1887, and a further extension reached Bondi Beach in February 1894. In the meantime, the line from Charing Cross to St Thomas Street, Bronte was opened in October 1890, to cater for people travelling to Waverley Cemetery – which had opened in 1877. Finally, on 20 May 1911 the line reached Bronte Beach, and by this time the system had been electrified.

The opening of the line was attended by a large crowd and the usual array of members of parliament and Waverley Council aldermen. Two ceremonies were held – one to see the tram depart from the Waverley Terminus, the other to greet the tram at the beach. There were a number of speeches, including the suggestion by Alderman Alldis that

the new extension would give the people of Woolloomooloo and other congested districts an opportunity to take a tram ride and get a wash.

Shops and houses

Over the years, newcomers built houses and shops along the routes taken by the transport, but Bronte was developed much later than most other parts of Waverley. By 1909 there were only 11 houses in the immediate vicinity of the beach. Although swimming in the surf had become popular, only four shops had been established at the beach by the 1920s. Snelling's Tea Room was one of these early shops, and at times the Bronte Surf Club committee held meetings there. There were few roads, and the delay in bringing the trams to the beach slowed development. The land eastward along MacPherson Street had been subdivided, but it wasn't until the 1920–30

period that houses were built in large numbers on the cliffs and ridges overlooking the beach. In December 1940, the roads from Oxford Street, Bondi Junction to Pacific Street, Bronte were consolidated and formally named Bronte Road. Before this, the route was made up of Cowper Street and Nelson Bay Road.

From the earliest days, the shops at the beach catered for the beachgoers, doing well in summer but struggling in winter. They included milk bars and a fish-and-chip shop as well as Lowe's Hoy Gee Chinese restaurant, a newsagent and a real estate office. Around 1956, Waverley Council permitted Bill Moyes and a group of Bronte shopkeepers to build and operate a kiosk in the park. The kiosk, located near the small Water Board building, operated for about four years before it was destroyed by fire.

Bronte's boom

The 1970s saw the beginnings of rising property prices in Bronte, as real estate agents began to promote the beauties of the area. The upward spiral in prices was partially fuelled by professionals, academics and others attracted to a beachside suburb that had successfully resisted commercial development. In many cases, properties had not been on the market for some years, and some long-term older residents took the opportunity to cash in and move. But for many who had grown up in Bronte, rising property values meant that it was difficult to stay in the area.

The 1990s saw the introduction of coffee shops and a licensed restaurant with tables on the footpath. By the early 2000s, houses that had been built in the 1920s and 1930s were being sold for millions of dollars. Bronte's proximity to central Sydney, reasonable public transport, good schools and sporting facilities, and village atmosphere were all great drawcards.

While these changes have brought boom times for the shops – even in winter, people pack the area from early morning to late afternoon – Bronte, unlike its neighbours Bondi and Coogee, has escaped large-scale commercial development. In the 1950s, there were 11 shops at the beach, the same number as today. The park, popular as ever for family picnics, along with the picnic huts, train, baths and the 'Bogey', remains essentially the same. Many of the original houses remain, but as they deteriorate, modern expensive replacements are being built. Perhaps Bronte's initial isolation and late development has proved a blessing.

Stan Vesper is the Bronte Surf Club historian

References

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