

Berala

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Berala is a small residential suburb centred on the railway station of that name, located 17.7 kilometres west of the city on the Lidcombe to Cabramatta railway line. It is part of the Auburn local government area and is entirely in the catchment of the main arm of Haslams Creek, a tributary of Parramatta River, which flows north into Homebush Bay. The Wangal clan of the Eora/Dharawal culture were the original inhabitants of the area.

The name Berala is derived from an Aboriginal word taken to mean swamp duck¹ or musk duck,² both related to the birds of swampy Haslams Creek.

Berala shares the 2141 postcode with Lidcombe and was originally the southern part of that suburb (which was known as Rookwood until 1914). It shares a boundary with Auburn, Lidcombe and Regents Park.

Early estates

A large proportion of the suburb was formerly the Hyde Park estate, a grant of 1,100 acres (445 hectares) to HG Douglas in 1833. Much of this estate was purchased by Joseph Hyde Potts in 1834 and 1835, and subdivided initially into farm lots and subsequently into residential lots.³ This area, now on the eastern side of the railway, was known locally as Hyde Park when still part of Lidcombe (Rookwood). There were earlier, smaller land grants, including one of 60 acres (24 hectares) to Thomas O'Donald in 1823, which encompassed what is now the western side of the railway.

Berala and the surrounding area was Cumberland Plain woodland – heavy clay country originally covered with open scrub forest which was exploited by early settlers for timber-getting and charcoal-burning. When cleared, it made poor farmland. However, the Haslams Creek flats were used for dairying, market gardens and poultry farms.

Railways and development

The railway came to Berala on 11 November 1912, when a single line, built with minimal earthworks, was opened to Regents Park.⁴ This line mainly followed Haslams Creek and so destroyed the most productive gardens. During construction, the proposed Berala station was variously called Sidmouth, Torrington and Bareela.⁵

Residential settlement was slow and mainly on the Hyde Park estate until the infrequent railway service was improved. This came about when the line was rebuilt with two tracks on an embankment and extended to join the southern line at Cabramatta. The new line opened on 8

October 1924.⁶ The line was electrified from 2 December 1929. As the population grew, agitation began for improved postal facilities. By 1920, there was a letter receiver, an authorised stamp seller and a public telephone. Mail was delivered from Lidcombe post office.

In 1925 a shopkeeper applied to open an unofficial post office on the western side of the railway station – about the time the stamp-selling licence was cancelled because of low sales. The application was recommended by the postal inspector. His report noted that there were 150 residences with a population of 400.

In 1933, as noted in the post office reports, there were 35 businesses. By 1935, there were only 26, though the population was 2,000. The Commonwealth Bank of Australia opened a branch in 1947, followed by the Bank of New South Wales and a building society. All have now closed.

Building a community

Churches and schools also played a part in the life of Berala. A Church of England Sunday school started in a house on the Hyde Park estate in 1893, as part of the Lidcombe parish. Berala was also part of the Catholic parish of Lidcombe. However, it was considered to be a distinct part of that parish, which was known as Hyde Park, when services started in a rented hall in 1919. An outstation of the Auburn Presbyterian church was built in Tilba Street in 1920 in a weatherboard hall. It was extended in 1921.

This hall was also used by the newly established Berala Public School from 1922 to 1924. A site in Auburn Road, on higher ground to the west of the shopping centre, was resumed in 1922 for a public school. The first building was occupied in 1924. Subsequent expansion has resulted in a school of about 1,000 students.⁷

Open space along the eastern boundary of Berala is divided between Coleman Park, used for soccer and baseball, and Carnarvon golf course, relocated from Silverwater in 1947.

The railway line, dominant on its embankment, was the scene of a fatal accident in thick fog on 7 May 1952, when one city-bound train ran into another which was standing at the station. Ten people were killed and 84 injured.⁸ A memorial plaque was unveiled at the station on the 50th anniversary.

The shopping centre developed along one side of Woodburn Road, facing vacant railway land and the station. This changed in December 1960, when more shops, including a supermarket and a hotel, opened on the vacant land.

Berala was essentially a suburb of detached single-storey houses. Only two factories can be traced, both small backyard affairs. A confectioner operated from the 1930s until about the late 1950s and a jewellery manufacturer from the 1940s until after 1960.

Changes came in the late 1960s with the construction of the first three- and four-storey apartment blocks, and later townhouses. The 1980s brought similar but higher density development, mainly on the western side of the railway.

In 2006, the shops built in 1960 (apart from the hotel) were demolished, to be replaced by a smaller number of shops on the ground floor of six- and seven-storey buildings.

Lawrence Gordon is a local historian

Endnotes

¹ J Jervis, *Place names of Parramatta and adjoining districts*, Parramatta District Historical Society, vol 2, p 56

² F Pollon, *The Book of Sydney Suburbs*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1988, p 27

³ *Liberty Plains: a History of Auburn NSW*, Council of the Municipality of Auburn, 1982

⁴ *Historical notes on the main suburban line*, State Rail Authority of New South Wales, Sydney, vol 1, 1976, revised 1981, p 91

⁵ *Station names: date of opening, closing and/or change of name*, Public Transport Commission of New South Wales, Sydney, 1965, 3rd edition, 1979, p 3

⁶ *Station names: date of opening, closing and/or change of name*, Public Transport Commission of New South Wales, Sydney, 1965, 3rd edition, 1979

⁷ Berala Public School reports

⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May 1952