

WAVERLEY COUNCIL

CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS: WAVERLEY IN 1959

A Waverley Library Local History Fact Sheet



Images from top:

Bondi Junction businesses,
1950. Grace Bros., Singer, and
Glamor Lingerie.

Main entrance to Eastern
Suburbs Hospital, Corner
Queens Park Rd and York Rd,
1959.

In 1959 Waverley celebrated its centenary, the local government area being officially proclaimed on 13 June 1859. Over the course of a century Waverley had developed from scattered settlements called home by 800 people, to a residential district with 19,000 buildings, nearly 80 miles of road and almost 65,000 residents. Echoing a pattern which continues today, property values were growing rapidly with the value of unimproved capital land at £18,223,275, while the improved capital land value was £79,553,372.

Bondi Junction was becoming one of the busiest shopping centres outside the Sydney CBD. Large city shops, such as department store giant Grace Bros. opened local branches to cater to the buying power of

Waverley residents. As traffic congestion became an issue for the first time at Bondi Junction, provision was made for off-street parking for shoppers.

In 1959 Waverley had 17 schools with two of them having more than 1,000 pupils each. It had two local hospitals, the War Memorial Hospital at Waverley and the Eastern Suburbs Hospital, the latter having been used by the United States Navy as a base hospital during WWII. The Eastern Suburbs Hospital operated from 1935-1983, with the site now occupied by Moriah College. Since 1912 meetings had been held in the area to discuss building a local synagogue, but it was not until 1960 that the Central Synagogue opened in Bon Accord Ave, Bondi Junction.

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Bondi Mermaids on Big Rock, 1960. Photograph by Wally Glover.

Female bathers in bikinis, Bondi Beach 1950s.

AT THE BEACH: MERMAIDS, BIKINIS, AND ARRESTS

Bondi Beach was attracting huge crowds, with up to 100,000 on the beach in summer and more than 5,000,000 visiting annually.

At the northern end of the beach sculptor Lyall Randolph, inspired by the Little Mermaid statue in Copenhagen, created two mermaids in bronze coloured fibreglass. The models for these mermaids were Jan Carmody, Miss Australia Surf 1959 and Lynette Whillier, a champion swimmer and runner-up in the same competition. Randolph first tried to sell the idea to Waverley Council, but was unsuccessful.

Undaunted, in April 1960 at his own expense, he installed them on the Big Rock at the foot of Ben Buckler, North Bondi. Despite an outcry from some members of the church that the statues were lewd, the Bondi mermaids soon became one of the area's most beloved features and Big Rock was informally re-named Mermaid Rock.

Bronte Beach was described as being 'tucked away in a secluded valley with a little natural glen, and shelter sheds attracting family picnickers'. Things were much quieter at Tamarama Beach which was described in 1959 as being 'popular with picnickers', but the beach 'much less frequented' than Bronte or Bondi.

Bikinis were the daring but controversial new beach fashion. In 1961, a 25 year old dancer Joan Barry was fined £3 for wearing an offensive swimming costume on Bondi Beach, the costume was described as being 'at least five inches below the navel'. She was also fined for calling a Waverley Council Lifeguard (then known as a Beach Inspector) who arrested her "a fool".

It wasn't only bikinis causing trouble, however. In the same year the Mayor of Waverley instructed Council's Lifeguards to make sure male swimmers did not offend against public decency either. According to

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Johnny O'Keefe, studio portrait 27 August, 1959. Photographs by Lynch, image courtesy of the SLNSW.

The Atlantics, 1961. Image courtesy of Fairfax.

the Mayor, many men had taken to the beach wearing “nothing more than exaggerated jockey shorts”.

NEW CULTURES: SURF MUSIC AND ROCK'N'ROLL

In the 1950s and the 1960s the rock and roll music scene began transforming Australian society. When Johnny O'Keefe grabbed the microphone in 1956, Australia got its first home-grown rock and roll icon. A local, Johnny grew up in Bondi Junction and his father Ray O'Keefe was Mayor of Waverley from 1960-1962.

It wasn't just rock and roll transforming Australian society. A new surfing culture had arrived on the beach and its youthful adherents had reconceptualised the beach as a site of unstructured recreation, a place of freedom and hedonism.

A group of teenagers from the Eastern Suburbs formed Australia's first big guitar band, The Atlantics, whose style was described as 'surf guitar'.

Their single 'Bombora' was released in 1963 and became an Australian and international one number one hit, with America's Cashbox magazine choosing it as its 'Record of the Week'.

Dances at surf clubs were a popular form of entertainment, attracting local teenagers and those from further afield. The most notable of these was the Sunday night dance at Bronte Surf Life Saving Club (SLSC) which regularly pulled huge crowds. The Delltones were at the height of their popularity and had a particularly close connection with the Bronte SLSC where they appeared regularly.

The Eastern Suburbs Leagues Club had just opened; operating in the now demolished Beach Court at North Bondi. With the support of Waverley Council the fledgling club was able to hire the first floor of the Bondi Beach Pavilion and it operated from there for a number of years.

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One of the main celebrations held for Waverley Council's centenary in 1959 was a formal dinner at the Rex Hotel, Bondi. The Governor of NSW, Eric Woodward (centre left), and Mayor Dudley Page (centre right) enter the hotel. 23rd July 1959

Alderman Ray O'Keefe, Deputy Mayor, speaks at Waverley Council's Centenary Dinner, Rex Hotel, Bondi. Seated at right: R. W. Askin, MLA, Deputy Leader of Opposition.

WAVERLEY ON THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STAGE

The Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies and his wife Dame Pattie Menzies visited Waverley on 10 September 1960. It was the first time in the Council's history that a Prime Minister had paid an official visit. As a memento of his visit, Menzies was presented with a bound copy of the newly published Council-sponsored book *The History of Waverley Municipal District 1859-1959* written by former employee, Bernard T. Dowd.

During his visit Menzies joked that he was a "former Bondi boy," having lived in the area for a total of six weeks many years ago. On Menzies visit to the Eastern Suburbs RSL Club, he presented them with a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, cementing his reputation as a royalist.

In 1960 Waverley Council sent a congratulatory message to the new President of the USA, Senator John Kennedy:

"That the Council of the Municipality of Waverley in the State of New South Wales, Australia, desires by this means to convey to you hearty congratulations on your election as President of the United States of America; and expresses the fervent hope that God Almighty will guide you in the discharge of your duties for the welfare of the American Nation."

Waverley's celebrations for its centenary in 1959 included: a formal dinner at the Rex Hotel, church services, the planting of pine trees at South Bondi, sporting events, a garden competition, a festival of nations and an historical play put on by the Bondi Theatrical Society.