

WAVERLEY COUNCIL

# THE GREAT AUSSIE COSSIE

A Waverley Library  
Local History Fact Sheet



Images from top:

A crowd at Bondi Beach, 1890s. Photographer Harry King. Image courtesy of the National Archives.

Bondi SBLSC, Postcard 'Peerless Surf Club Bondi', posing in front of their tent clubhouse, 1900s.

The 1889 By-Law No. 145 of the Borough of Waverley declared:

*"Any person who, except in a public bath and proper bathing dress, shall bathe near to or within view of any inhabited house, reserve, or place of public resort, between the hours of 8 o'clock in the morning and 8 o'clock in the evening, shall be liable to a penalty not exceeding five pounds nor less than five shillings."*

What constituted proper bathing dress? A fashion note of 1876 describes *"a jacket and drawers of soft blue serge cut in one piece, with an added pelmet and belt...plain round sleeves, the elbows with a frill. The dress may be ornamented with white or coloured braid."*

The purpose of the early bathing costumes for ladies was to cover the body as much as possible. By 1896 *"the tunic is cut almost to the knees. A wide frill forms the sleeves and trims the top of the jacket. Full knickers drawn in at the knee and wide frills complete the costume."*

Bathing caps were also a necessary part of any bathing outfit, to prevent the problem of wet, untidy and unladylike hair.

In the early 1900s surfing had grown in popularity and by 1906 all the surf life saving clubs in the Waverley Municipality had been established. In 1907, the Mayor of Waverley, Alderman R.G. Watkins, made an impromptu inspection of Bondi. What he saw made him draw a line in

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Images from top:

Bathers at Bondi, 1919. Image courtesy of State Archives & Records.

Bathers on Bondi Beach, 1922.

the sand.

*"What we saw was disgusting. Some of these surf bathers are nothing but exhibitionists, putting on small trunks. They are in worse manner than if they were nude. But they won't continue doing it at Bondi Beach, not so long as I am mayor."*

The costume ordered by Waverley Council was "a guernsey with trouser legs reaching from the elbow to the bend of the knee, together with a skirt attached to the garment, covering the figure from hips to knees."

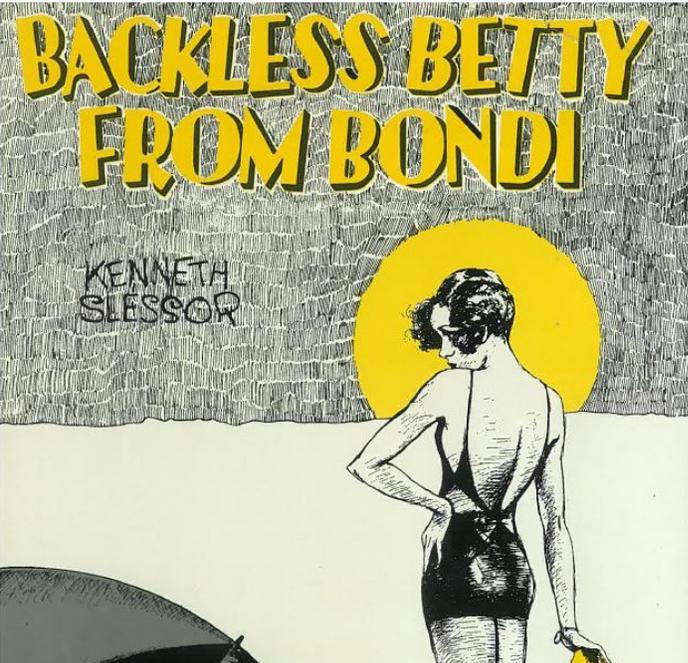
What followed was to become known as "the Bondi Burlesque"; a demonstration staged by beachgoers to parody the 'neck to knee' regulations, whereby bathers appeared wearing an absurd assortment of skirts, shawls and other outlandish garments to show their impracticality.

The Australian Surf Costume of 1911 was "made regulation shape and buttons on shoulder. The costume that you can swim

*in... thick enough to be worn without V Trunks. Stocked in Navy, with coloured neck, sleeves and bottom. The average weight is 9 ounces. Price six shillings and six pence."*

After World War I, the one-piece bathing costume was pioneered by Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman in the U.S.A., but her costume was considered very daring. Most women wore knee-length stockings, rubber shoes and bathing caps, relieved only by loose kimonos and Japanese umbrellas. Made of wool, their costumes remained uncomfortably damp for long periods, and had an odd smell.

In the 1920s David Jones was advertising the "Orient One-piece Canadian Costume from ten shillings and six pence. A one-piece style which is quite the most popular this season." Mark Foy's, not to be outdone, in 1923 advertised: "Sill's One-piece Swimming Costumes, assuring a Joyous Freedom of Movement that is unique in Bathing Costumes."



Images from top:

Book cover of Kenneth Slessor's volume of poetry *Backless Betty from Bondi*. Illustration by Virgil Reilly.

Beach girls on Bondi Promenade, 1947. Norma Weston, Monica Kelly, Patty Jupp, Judith ( Judy ) Parnell.

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In the late 1920s Australian writer Kenneth Slessor had fun in his poem 'Backless Betty from Bondi' imploring the Council and the Beach Inspectors to leave the Bondi bathing girls alone:

*'You aldermen who thunder out  
Damnation for the Backless,  
Your waists, no doubt, are  
rather stout,  
Which makes you somewhat  
tackless;  
And you, arch-bulldogs of the  
sand,  
So big and brown and artless  
Who put the bellow  
In the banned –  
Inspectors,  
Don't be heartless!'*

With the end of the Depression's makeshift shabbiness, grooming became paramount. Women also took to daringly wearing slacks; beach pyjamas and tailored shorts became fashionable beach wear and a modest two-piece bathing suit appeared on the beaches displaying a few inches of bared midriff. Post-World War II swimsuits became briefer and better fitting and showed off figures better than

ever before. Beach fashion was going through a revolution. After the one-piece costume parted in the middle, the expanse between waist and leg got smaller and smaller. By 1951 it was measured at 2.5cm and the bikini appeared that summer on Bondi Beach for the first time. Beach Inspectors had the thankless job of policing fashion, prowling the beaches with tape measures. Ten years later, bikini wearers were still being ordered off the beach.

Over one weekend in October 1961, 50 girls were sent from Sydney beaches for wearing 'offensive' bikinis. The debate continued at local government level, culminating in one of the most creative solutions ever put to Waverley Council to decide what constituted decent, or indecent, swimwear. In 1961 Alderman J. Einfield proposed that women wearing bikinis parade before Waverley Aldermen and that "Aldermen could then judge if the bikinis were decent."

In reporting the proposal *The Daily Telegraph* quipped 'The Eyes Have It'.



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## IN BRIEF **Bondi goes topless**

**SYDNEY:** Topless bathing on Australia's most famous tourist beach, Bondi, was given the blessing of local authorities yesterday.

The Waverley Municipal Council unanimously rejected a petition by 1,000 residents of Bondi calling for a ban on topless bathing at the southern end of the beach.

The Mayor, Alderman E. Page, said after the council meeting, "There's been topless bathing for years at the southern end of the beach", but a code of dress should be observed on the northern end.

Images from top:

Beach Inspectors at Bondi.  
Left to right, Bill Willis, Aub  
Laidlow; Brian Davidson.

Article on topless bathing at  
Bondi Beach, The Canberra  
Times 30 November, 1978.

By the end of the year the NSW Government announced that it would abandon local government ordinances prescribing minimum dimensions for swimsuits, and that a new ordinance would simply provide that bathers should be 'clad in a proper and adequate bathing costume.'

The tussle against topless bathers became the next cry of battle. Churchgoers of 1978 signed petitions requesting that the beach inspectors should enforce the "rules of decent attire" on Bondi Beach and "restore Bondi's reputation as a family beach". Waverley Council made a unanimous decision, however, that no action would be taken against topless bathers using the southern end of Bondi Beach, south of the storm-water channel.