

Wonderland City



Wonderland City, Tamarama, 1907

In 1906, William Anderson, a theatrical entrepreneur of growing prominence, leased the land formerly occupied by The Royal Aquarium and Pleasure Grounds (generally referred to as the 'Bondi Aquarium') in Tamarama Park, minus a 12-foot strip of coastline to allow the public access to the beach. He also leased further land in Tamarama Gully, then known as Tamarama Glen or simply 'the Glen', and constructed his 20-acre outdoor entertainment masterpiece, Wonderland City.



The main entrance was a large white weatherboard building in Wonderland Avenue near the point at which it joins Fletcher Street. The entry price was 6 pence for adults and 3 pence for children with all rides costing an additional fee.

Opening on Saturday, 1 December 1906 Wonderland claimed to equal 'those amusement grounds... of the far famed Coney Island, New York, or White City, Chicago'. William Anderson also claimed "there weren't sufficient trams in Sydney to transport the crowd ... for the opening."

On this opening night approximately 20,00 people travelled out to Wonderland to go on fairground rides, view the novelty attractions and walk among the natural beauty of Tamarama Glen, which was lit by strings of electric lights and described as a 'fairy city'.

*William Anderson (1868-1940)
Wonderland's flamboyant proprietor*

The wonders of Wonderland

Some of the attractions included:

- an artificial lake
- the first open-air ice skating rink in Australia
- roller-skating rink, which sometimes doubled as a boxing ring

- double-decker merry-go-round
- Haunted House and the Helter Skelter
- steam-driven switchback railway
- maze, circus ring and fun factory
- the Airem Scarem, an airship that tracked on a cable from cliff to cliff and was supported on the cliffs at both ends by massive wooden structures. At high tide this airship ran over the sea.
- wax works
- Katzenjammer Castle, Hall of Laughter, Box Ball Alley
- Alice the elephant, a seal pond and an aquarium
- Japanese tearooms and an Alpine slide
- the Kings Theatre, a kind of music hall, could seat 1,000 people for variety shows

Employing over 160 people, Wonderland set a new standard for Australian outdoor pleasure grounds. Large crowds, estimated at 2,000 people came every summer weekend, with seventy turnstiles at the entrance doing a brisk trade.

Wonderland was known for its novelty and 'shocking' acts, with William Anderson the consummate showman. He organised for a couple to be married at Wonderland, and then paraded through the grounds on the back of Alice the elephant. One daredevil performer Jack Lewis roller skated down a ramp, through a hoop of fire and landed in a tank with sharks – much to the horror of the crowd. Miraculously Jack always survived unharmed.

Conflict with Tamarama swimmers

Despite the 12-foot public access path to Tamarama Beach being excluded from his lease, William Anderson installed an 8-foot wire fence across this land. He claimed this was necessary as fare-evaders were entering Wonderland by sneaking along the beach and under his beachfront boundary fence.

The barbed wire fence extended down the cliff on the southern end of the beach, across the rocks and sand to the rocks at the beach's northern end. However this wire fence also blocked access for swimmers to the beach. Some of these swimmers were influential businessmen and having their local beach cut off incensed them.

The swimmers started an on-going battle with Anderson; they would cut his wire fence, he would repair it and contact the police. The police would arrive and warn the swimmers and the following weekend the same scenario would be re-enacted.

George B. Philip, the foundation President of the Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club, was one of these swimmers and he later recalled how he got around one particular wire fence gatekeeper.

'I scaled under the barbed wire fence practically every day, I knew every nook and corner of it – until I was caught by the gatekeeper. The outcome of this was that I came to an arrangement with him whereby that if I carried his billy of tea from the kiosk to (the) main gate at 5 o'clock each day, I could walk in and out when I liked (much to the envy of my mates, who were not caught)...'

The stalemate between the swimmers and William Anderson continued, with the swimmers eventually taking a deputation to NSW Parliament. On 6 March 1907, the Minister for Lands, James Ashton, issued an order to resume the 12-foot strip of land fronting the beach to "give free access for all time to the beach at Tamarama Bay."



At the Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club's centenary celebrations Ken Stewart, grandson of one of the original fence cutters Bill Stewart, re-enacts his grandfather's cutting of the barbed wire in 1906-1907

Many of these victorious swimmers formed the nucleus of a new surf club, the Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club. On 11 February 1908 the first surf 'gymkhana', equivalent to a surf carnival, was held at Wonderland on Tamarama Beach and was held each year until Wonderland closed.

The end of Wonderland City

Meanwhile, bad publicity dogged Wonderland. The conflict with local swimmers and the wire fence incident soured the public image of Wonderland, as did complaints that the animals were being poorly housed and mistreated. The occasional breakdown of the Airem Scarem airship above the dangerous surf caused accusations of safety breaches and resident opposition to the weekend revellers at Wonderland grew.

The crowd numbers dropped but Williams Anderson fought back bringing in famous entertainers and more daring acts from his national touring circuit to perform at the King's Theatre.

Anderson responded with more elaborate public exhibitions, but the public was tiring of Wonderland and the crowds dropped. It struggled on from March 1908 to December 1910 with poor crowds and low revenue, finally closing in 1911. William Anderson is said to have lost £15,000 on Wonderland City.

Wonderland was the precursor of Luna Park, setting unprecedented standards for popular outdoor entertainment in Sydney. In its day it was the largest open-air amusement park in the Southern Hemisphere, and its decline does not diminish the grandeur of William Anderson's vision.

Although little visible evidence of Wonderland survives today, with the possible exception of the two paths on the northern boundary of Tamarama Gully, the NSW Heritage Office still considers the site to be of archaeological significance.

Today a mural commissioned by the Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club on the side of their clubhouse celebrates the history of Wonderland and the part it played in the formation of their club.

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