

WAVERLEY COUNCIL

WATER WOMEN



A Waverley Library Local History Fact Sheet

Waverley's famous coastline has been enjoyed and celebrated by generations of swimmers. Some have paddled recreationally, others have swum competitively, and some have gone on to international glory.

Two Waverley women made an indelible mark on the world of competitive swimming, and were the first Australian women to compete in the Olympic Games. In Stockholm 1912, not only did Fanny Durack and Mina Wylie compete, they won. Earning gold and silver for Australia, and making strides for women athletes worldwide.

While these women could have easily been unfriendly competitors, they swam against each other consistently at swimming events as well as at the Olympics they were, in fact,

great friends and supporters of each others swimming careers.

MINA (WILHEMINA) WYLIE 1899-1984

Mina Wylie, Australian pioneer and champion swimmer first learnt to swim at Bronte Baths. Her father, Henry Alexander ('Harry') Wylie, himself a champion long distance swimmer and diver, leased Bronte Baths from Waverley Council 1 November 1895 to June 1901.

Mina became Australia's first female Olympic silver medalist when she came second to Fanny Durack in the women's 100m freestyle, still an extraordinary win as she started badly and had to work even harder to make up time during the race. She managed to pass all of the other swimmers to come in just

Images from top:

Swimmers Fanny Durack and Mina Wiley, 1912. Image courtesy of the SLNSW.

Mina Wylie, Coogee, 1913. Image courtesy of the SLNSW.

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Images from top:

Portrait of Fanny Durack,
Exchange Studios, 1912.
Image courtesy of the NLA.

Swimmers Fanny Durack, Mina
Wiley, and Jennie Fletcher
celebrating their win in the
100m freestyle, Stockholm
Olympics 1912. Image courtesy
of the NMA.

behind Fanny Durack.

Mina had a long and highly successful Australian and international swimming career and went on to world-wide fame. Her amazing swimming ability is recognized by her inclusion in the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Florida. This centre is recognized by FINA, the international governing body of swimming, diving and water polo, as the official hall for aquatic sports.

FANNY (SARAH FRANCES) DURACK

1889-1956

Fanny became Australia's first female Olympic gold medalist when she won the women's 100m freestyle at the Stockholm Olympics in the then world record time of 79.8 seconds. This was the only individual event women could compete.

Between 1912 and 1918 she went on to break 12 further world records and earn her place in the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Florida.

Since her death in 1956 Fanny Durack's final resting place has been Waverley Cemetery, fittingly overlooking the ocean. Her grave had been unmarked, overgrown and seemingly forgotten until Waverley Council set up a fund to buy a plaque to mark her grave and honour her contribution to Australian swimming. As well as money donated by Waverley Council, funds were received from the NSW state government, local swimming and surf life saving clubs, Fanny's American niece and a former swimming pupil of Fanny's.

\$3000 was raised and in 1990 her grave was restored and a new onyx headstone put in place. It reads:

'In memory of Sarah "Fanny" Durack (Mrs. Bernard Gately) died 20 March, 1956, aged 66. First woman swimmer to win an Olympic gold medal, Stockholm, 1912. Held every world freestyle record from 100 yards to one mile.'

Fanny's brother Frank is also buried in the same grave.



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Countless other women from Waverley have braved and conquered the waves, some others of note include:

BEA (BEATRICE) MILES 1902-1973

Bea Miles was a bohemian rebel and renowned Sydney eccentric. She grew up in a privileged family, was educated at the private girl's school 'Abbotsleigh' where she graduated with Honours in English. She studied medicine, then arts at university, but she left before graduation when an inheritance from her grandmother allowed her to escape her unhappy home life.

She took to the streets of Sydney becoming a high profile eccentric, well-known for hitching rides in taxis and refusing to pay the fare and reciting Shakespeare for a monetary donation. Throughout her life she was mainly homeless living on the street or in parks around the City of Sydney.

Bea was a very good swimmer and loved Bondi Beach, she was often seen there with a

sheaf knife strapped to her leg which she said she kept there to protect her from a shark attack. There are unconfirmed reports which have her swimming from the headland at North Bondi to the Icebergs Club at South Bondi, which, if true, would make her the first woman to swim across Bondi Bay.

JEAN (VIOLA JEAN) COCKS 1915-

In January 1929, at only 13 years of age, Bondi's Jean Cocks won the 200 metres freestyle Australian Women's Championship amazing onlookers with her speed and powerful style. She was described by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as "a rising star in the aquatic firmament" and also a "child star". Because of her youth she was accompanied by a chaperone when she travelled to compete in swimming competitions.

Jean was such a good swimmer that at one stage she was only 1/5 second behind one of Fanny Durack's Australian records and she also became the 100 metre

Images from top:

A young Bea Miles, undated. Image courtesy of Randwick Library.

Jean Cocks wearing her swimming club uniform, c. 1929. Image courtesy of the NLA.



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Images from top:

Evelyn de Lacy, 1934. Image courtesy of the NLA.

Bronte Baths, 1991. Evelyn Whillier swam at the baths for many years after moving to Bronte.

champion of Australia. Her times in the 100 metre race were only 3 seconds behind the world record.

At a Brisbane swimming carnival in 1931 her style was described as 'a fast powerful stroke that lifted her shoulders well out of the water' and she was able to retain her title of 100 yards Ladies Champion of Australia at the Australian National Swimming Championship. Jean was still competing the following year with her times almost reaching an Olympic record.

Despite her amazing record Jean Cocks has almost become a forgotten woman of Australian swimming history, but we remember her as one of our pioneering water women.

EVELYN WHILLIER 1917-2004

Another famous local swimmer was Evelyn Whillier (née de Lacy). As an 18-year-old she represented Australia in swimming at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, two years later she won a gold medal at the 1938 Empire Games. After the

Olympics Evelyn settled in Bronte and became a regular morning swimmer at Bronte Baths. Even in her late 70s she could be seen in the water at 5.00am daily, summer and winter, swimming several kilometres as part of her exercise routine.

She was an active member of the Bronte Breakers and the Bronte Amateur Ladies Swimming Club, coaching and giving swimming lessons for more than 40 years. She is credited with teaching two generations of locals to swim. When she was asked by an interviewer about life in Bronte she said:

"The beach, the smell of the surf and the sea, the walk back through the park – what more could you want in life?"

Waverley Council publicly honoured Evelyn Whillier's contribution to our local area by making her the first member of the Heroes Walk at Bronte Beach.



Margaret Dovey, at the NSW Swimming Championships, Bondi Baths, 1939

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**MARGARET WHITLAM
1919-2012**

Margaret Whitlam (née Dovey) is best known as the wife of former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, but prior to her marriage she was a local Bondi girl and a champion swimmer. Margaret represented Australia at the 1938 British Empire Games in Sydney, was a member of the Bondi Amateur Swimming Club and competed in many NSW State championships becoming the Australian breaststroke champion in 1937.