

WAVERLEY COUNCIL

# BONDI'S BIG ROCK

North Bondi rock platform

A Waverley Library  
Local History Fact Sheet



Images from top:

The Big Rock, North Bondi.

Brass plaque on the Big Rock, commemorating its arrival on Bondi Beach in 1912.

Bondi has its own entry into Australia's catalogue of Big Things. Bondi Beach's northern headland features a flat rock platform below the cliffs. On the rock platform is Ben Buckler's very own Big Rock. A huge boulder, attached to its side is a brass plaque which reads:

*Municipality of Waverley. This rock weighing 235 tons was washed from the sea during a storm on 15 July 1912. January 1933. J. S. MacKinnon. Town Clerk.*

It was fixed to the rock on 16 March, 1933 some twenty years after the events that brought the Big Rock to Bondi's shores.

On Saturday 13 July, 1912 Sydney was under the influence of monsoonal activity resulting in a steady downpour

of rain. Conditions deteriorated the following day and the weather was described by *The Daily Telegraph* as

*'a cyclonic storm – a bleak southerly gale raging, with fierce rain squalls. During the afternoon the rough weather on the coast continued with, if anything, greater fury.'*

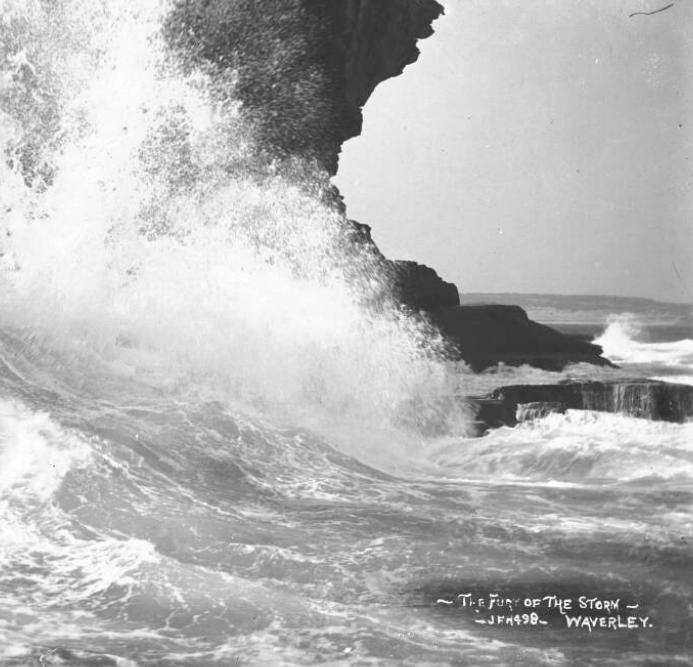
The *Sydney Morning Herald* described the weather as coming 'from a cyclonic disturbance between Lord Howe Island and the central coast of NSW' reporting that the wind was up to 113 km per hour. Along the coast, from Manly to Long Bay, beaches sustained serious damage.

The wild weather continued over the weekend with newspaper reports describing waves at Tamarama as 'rolling

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The fury of the storm,  
Waverley. Photo by Frank  
Hurley, circa 1910-1960. Image  
courtesy of the NLA.

Bondi's "Castle" Pavilion, built  
in 1911 as dressing sheds.  
Photo circa 1917.

in like mountains' and sea spray breaking at points 'which had previously been unvisited by the waters of the Pacific'. Bronte Baths were damaged by this storm and the force of the sea threw huge boulders into the Bogey Hole.

On Bondi Beach the ocean had washed up to the edge of the concrete wall which then ran behind the beach, completely covering the sand. At Bondi Baths a gigantic plank, probably a diving board, described as being 'about a foot in thickness' was snapped in half.

The Watts family who lived in the old 'Castle' Pavilion, the forerunner to the current Bondi Pavilion, right on Bondi Beach reported being terrified by the storm as the south-facing beach bore the full front of the weather.

It was after this wild weather subsided that a giant boulder on the North Bondi rock platform was first noticed. It was reported that the force of the mountainous seas which

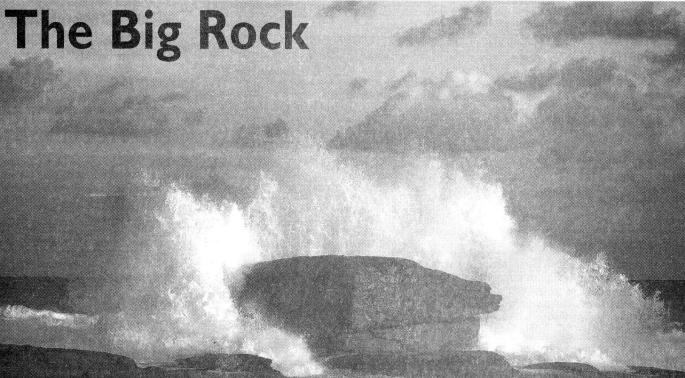
swept along the beaches during these storms had thrown up this enormous sandstone rock from the ocean floor onto the rock platform.

In November, 1932 it was grandly titled 'Bondi's Gibraltar' by the Sydney Morning Herald which reported on Waverley Council's decision to put a 'tablet' on the rock twenty years after its presence was first recorded, in order to document its history.

#### **GRAVITY OR THE POWER OF THE OCEAN**

The long-accepted position on how The Big Rock came to be sitting on the North Bondi rock platform was that the boulder had been thrown up during the wild storms of July 1912, something that those who witnessed it had no trouble in believing.

Soon after the storms scientist Carl A. Sussmilch took measurements of the rock, talked to locals and calculated its weight at 232 tons. He noted deep eroded grooves near it which ran along the rock



Images from top:

Cover of The Bondi View's 2002 June/July edition featuring Lee Cass's article "Exploding the Myth".

Bondi Mermaids and local surfers, North Bondi, 1970.

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platform toward the sea and deduced that the force of the storm lifted the rock up from under the sea, flipped it over and with the aid of the strong wind skimmed it along the surface of the platform. He believed it had been turned over, leaving a new surface on top and marine-growth on the underside.

Local residents were divided; some believed the rock had always been there, claiming that they had frequently changed into their swimming costumes behind it. Another view was that there used to be many smaller rocks around this huge one and it was these smaller ones which were washed away during the storms, leaving The Big Rock exposed and prominent in a way it hadn't been before and leading to the belief that it had suddenly appeared.

Regardless of some views to the contrary, the position that The Big Rock was washed up in the July 1912 became the accepted one and this position is repeated in most histories of

Bondi Beach.

In 2002 Bondi resident Lee Cass, then editor of local paper The Bondi View disputed the long-accepted theory that The Big Rock was thrown up by the sea. His detailed rebuttal analyses the accepted wisdom about The Big Rock and finds it all wanting.

He proposed an alternative view, that The Big Rock fell from the headland at Ben Buckler and furthermore that it was in place as long ago as 1888. His article 'The Big Rock: exploding the myth' features in The Bondi View June/July 2002 edition.

#### MERMAID ROCK

In April 1960 after a great deal of bureaucratic red tape and considerable controversy, sculptor Lyall Randolph created two mermaid statues and installed them at his own expense on The Big Rock. The mermaids quickly became beloved public icons, and the media began to refer to The Big Rock as Mermaid Rock.

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Mermaid Jan at Waverley Library, 1990.

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

Mermaid Lynette was washed out to sea in a wild storm in 1974 and has not been seen since. Mermaid Jan lost an arm and her tail in the same storm and two years later was taken down by Waverley Council for safe keeping. Her home is now Waverley Library, safely ensconced in her Perspex box. For decades afterwards, despite having no mermaids, the rock continued to be referred to as Mermaid Rock.

However that name, along with the memory of the mermaids who made it their rocky throne, has now almost disappeared and the boulder has gone back to its first, and basically self-descriptive title The Big Rock.

## WILD WEATHER

In June 2012, almost 100 years after the ferocious storm which is generally believed to have thrown up The Big Rock from its former watery home, extraordinarily powerful weather hit the east coast of Australia.

This battered Sydney's beaches and the accompanying wild winds caused extensive damage.

At Bondi huge seas rolled in, covering the sand and sending enormous waves crashing against the breakwater at the northern end of the beach and overrunning the promenade. Emergency service workers described it as a 'one-in-100-year storm'. Wild weather and powerful storms have continued to batter the coast, with serious weather events occurring in 2015 and 2022. The Big Rock remains firmly in place, the once throne of Bondi's mermaids.