

Bronte's Baths: a history



The earliest known photo of Bronte Baths, 1888

The Bronte Baths story begins in 1883 when Waverley Council set aside 150 pounds to build sea baths at Bronte. Before the Baths there was an existing swimming spot in this location, known as 'the bogey hole at South Nelson Bay'.

Construction of the Baths commenced in 1887 under the supervision of A. Williams, an engineer with the NSW Department of Public Works, Harbours and Rivers Branch. At the same time Williams was supervising the building of the Bondi Baths.

Bronte Baths opened the same year and shortly after Council adopted regulations for conduct at the Baths:

'Gentlemen could bathe between daylight from 10.00am to 4.00pm each day. Ladies could also bathe at the same time daily, except Sundays and public holidays which were reserved exclusively for men.'

It also noted that 'each person using the Baths shall wear an appropriate bathing dress'. Entry to the Baths cost fourpence (adults) and tuppence (children).

The Council leased the Baths out to private operators. The first was Frank Lloyd in 1887, then Harry Wylie, G. Rowles, the Bond family for almost 50 years, with the final lessee Andrew Cleland operating the Baths into the 1960s, before Council later resumed control over their operation.

The Bronte Baths has been known by many different names including: Bond's Ocean Pool, Wylie's Bronte Baths and Bronte Ocean Pool.

Harry A. Wylie, champion distance diver, took a lease of the Baths in 1895. He proved to be a popular lessee, under his management he offered the latest health cure, hot sea baths, thought to fix a variety of ailments including arthritis.

Wylie taught his daughter Mina to swim there and she went on to international fame. Wylie moved from Bronte to Coogee where he built the baths which still bear his name.

Ocean baths have the attraction of swimming in the open air, in salt water, yet in a safe enclosure. With its free entry and year-round availability, Bronte Baths is a much-loved local amenity, home to learn-to-swim classes, morning exercisers and weekend racers.

The National Trust has classified Bronte Baths as having significant heritage value. Waverley Council did a major upgrade of the Baths in 2006, returning it to a more natural, uncluttered style. The Baths now look remarkably like they did in 1887.

Home of the Australian crawl

Although the origin of the swimming style known as the 'Australian crawl' has been historically disputed, what is popularly agreed is that Australia was the first to compete in swimming events using this swimming stroke.

The Australian crawl is a style of over arm, or freestyle, swimming stroke now familiar in competition swimming throughout the world.

Alick Wickham was a young Solomon Islander was a keen swimmer who lived in Sydney in the early years of the 20th century. In 1901 the 15-year-old Wickham entered a race at Bronte Baths and astonished the on-lookers with his speed and unusual swimming style.

A competitor described that Wickham:

"...swam with his head held fairly high, turning it quickly from side to side breathing with each complete stroke. The entry of his arms was short and towards the centre line of the body with the elbows well bent. His arm action was very fast and short. Each arm performed a symmetrical action with the head turning from side to side as if breathing on each side, but only breathing on one side to each stroke."

A prominent swimming coach at the East Sydney Swimming Club, George Farmer, who witnessed Wickham's swim, is said to have exclaimed "Look at that kid crawling!" And the stroke became known as the 'Australian crawl'. Farmer recruited the young man to the East Sydney Swimming Club and trained Wickham to become one of Sydney's top swimmers.

The style was not invented by Wickham, but was common throughout the Solomon Islands where it was known as *Tuppa-tup-pala*. It is reportedly also known in other parts of the Pacific, with Olympic swimmer Duke Kahanamoku claiming the same swimming style was also practised in Hawaii.

Interestingly the same stroke was being developed completely independently – by a British migrant and his family.

London-born Frederick Cavill and his six sons were excellent swimmers and are renowned as a pioneer Australian swimming family. At the same time that Wickham wowed the Bronte Baths crowd, the Cavills were also developing a similar swimming style.

The difference between the two was that whereas Wickham used the stroke exclusively throughout a swimming race, the Cavill men used it primarily at the end of a race as a final spurt.

Today the term 'freestyle' has replaced the idiomatic 'Australian crawl', but the name lives on in rock music history. A Melbourne-based band, whose sound reflected 1980s surf culture, took inspiration from this swimming style and named itself Australian Crawl.



The swimmers

Waverley was involved with surf bathing from the earliest days. After the Municipalities Acts of 1858 and 1867 empowered local Councils to build baths and pools the 1880s subsequently saw a boom in ocean bath construction. Bronte Baths opened in 1887.

The formation of swimming clubs soon followed, often centred at these ocean baths along the NSW coastline. A highlight of the swimming clubs' calendar was carnivals whose popularity attracted large crowds.

These carnivals often had a circus-like atmosphere with displays of wrestling, boxing, and novelty swimming events alongside the serious racing.

In November 1890 the Waverley Swimming Club held a tournament at the baths. Four years later the baths scored a coup when the Eastern Suburbs Swimming Club moved its headquarters from the pool at the Coogee Aquarium to the Bronte Baths.

In 1921 the Bronte Splashers Swimming Club formed, with winter swimming a feature of the club.

Two years later lessee John Bond proved himself a trendsetter when he introduced the daring practice of mixed sex bathing on Sundays, holiday afternoons and evenings.

The baths' most unusual swimmer arrived unannounced one day - a shark washed into the pool by a high tide and wild seas.

One of the many famous swimmers at Bronte Baths was Olympian Evelyn Whillier (De Lacey). 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.

When Evelyn returned she settled in Bronte and became a Bronte Baths regular until her death in 2004. 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 by making her the first member of the Heroes Walk at Bronte Beach.

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