

## **Tamarama: a brief history**

Tamarama, situated between Bondi and Bronte, has a fascinating history and many famous locals have called Tamarama home. Its most notable residents include 'Alice', the only elephant to ever reside in the Waverley Local Government Area, and David Fletcher, the first Mayor of Waverley.

### **Land of storms**

The first recorded name for the area we now know as Tamarama was in the 1830s when it was identified on a military map as Gamma Gamma, an Indigenous word. It is believed that this word means 'storm'.

With rock shelters long the coastline making good living quarters and plentiful food and water available it is unsurprising that in the period before European settlement, there is clear evidence of Indigenous occupation of Tamarama.

Fresh water was available from the natural stream in Tamarama Gully behind the beach, and the ocean provided an abundant source of fresh seafood. Local midden deposits with an accumulation of shell food refuse and also evidence of fireplaces attest to the level of food available.

One particular midden, atop a sandstone rock ledge at Tamarama, has been classified by the National Parks and Wildlife Service as a site of archaeological significance because 'beachside shelters with midden deposits are rare on the Tasman Sea coast'. To protect it the exact location of this midden is restricted.

Rock carvings on the coastal walk at Mackenzies Bay depict various fish species and were probably formed by the carver pecking small holes in the rock surface with a pointed stone or shell, and later joining these together by grooving the rock. These abraded grooves carved into the rock face represent either a shark or a whale and two fish. The age of these engravings is not known however they are estimated to be up to 2,000 years old.

### **From Gamma Gamma to Glamarama**

The land on which Tamarama Park is now situated was granted to J.R. Hatfield in 1839 and was identified as Gamma Gamma. Locals called the area Dixon's Bay after Dr. Dixon, a nearby landowner. In the 1870s it became known as Fairlight Glen (named after an early house 'Fairlight'), then Fletcher's Glen, after David Fletcher, who owned a 10-acre beach frontage.

From 1887-1891 the Royal Aquarium and Pleasure Grounds occupied the northern headland of Tamarama where the Surf Life Saving Club now stands and Tamarama Park behind the beach. During this time the beach was known as Aquarium Beach. When the amusement park Wonderland was in residence, the whole Tamarama beachside area – beach, park and gully – was called Wonderland City.

When conflicts between developers and residents hit the headlines in 2005, the *Sydney Morning Herald* dubbed the area 'Dramarama'. Because the beach has attracted more than its fair share of A-list celebrities and 'beautiful people', the media has also jokingly referred to Tamarama as 'Glamarama'.

### **Julian Ashton's Tamarama**

In 1899 English artist Julian Rossi Ashton (1851-1942) painted *Tamarama beach, forty years ago, a summer morning*. This idyllic painting, of women lying nude and draped in gauze over the rocks on the Tamarama headland is a highly romantic view of the area.

Ashton is now remembered as an exponent of Australian impressionism who used to take his students on 'plein air' painting excursions to the eastern suburbs beaches. While Coogee was a well-known destination, this painting indicates that Tamarama was also a favourite.

His students remember that him as, 'an early riser, he bathes in the sea all the year round, cultivates his vegetable patch and tends his poultry..., and frequently paints before breakfast.'

Arriving in Australia in 1878, and in Sydney in 1883, Ashton painted Tamarama Gully, for *The Picturesque Atlas of Australia*. He fell in love with Tamarama and settled locally. Another Australian artist, Elioth Gruner, was also in residence and there is evidence that an informal artist's colony may have existed at Tamarama at this time.

In 1889 Ashton painted a sketch of Tamarama Gully for Mary Anne Fletcher, daughter of David Fletcher. He wrote to her on 25 November that year:

*'Your father has no doubt handed you the little sketch of the Glen I did for you. If it gives you a [little] of the pleasure I have felt in that beautiful spot, I shall feel that the poor and unsuccessful effort I have made to reproduce those beauties is amply repaid.'*

### **'No Lives Lost': Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club**

Tamarama is known as one of Australia's most dangerous patrolled beaches. Despite this, for 100 years no lives have been lost while Tamarama surf life savers and Waverley Council lifeguards have been on patrol. The Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club was formed after winning a long battle with the owners of the amusement park Wonderland about public access to the beach.

Wonderland City was an amusement park, similar to Luna Park, which was located in the park behind the beach. It had a barbed wire perimeter fence, built to stop visitors sneaking into the amusement park without paying, by coming in via the beach front. But this fence also cut off access to the beach, making local swimmers angry and caused on-going friction with William Anderson, the owner of Wonderland.

Despite the protests the Wonderland management were unrepentant, the fence was staying. One Sunday the surfers produced bolt cutters and cut the barbed wire fence and William Anderson, responded by calling the police. The fence was repaired. The following weekend the local swimmers returned, the fence was cut again – and down came the Waverley police. This stand-off continued.

Their fight went all the way to the NSW Parliament where the Minister declared that Tamarama Beach was public land. Some of these victorious locals formed a new club to protect swimmers at the beach, it became the Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club.



*Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club occupies the northern headland overlooking the beach.  
Photo: Stewart family.*

### **Tamarama becomes Gallipoli**

In 1915 Tamarama Beach earned its place in Australian film history when it was used as the location for Anzac Cove in the World War 1 silent film drama *The Hero of the Dardanelles*.

Made by Australasian Films, *The Hero of the Dardanelles* was the first feature film made about Gallipoli and was released less than three months after the actual landings. Director of the film was one of Australia's best silent filmmakers, Alfred Rolfe. In the film, essentially a World War 1 propaganda piece, a young Australian soldier is sent to Gallipoli, where he is heroically wounded protecting Red Cross workers, but dramatically survives.

The filmmakers needed a long narrow cove, with cliffs either side, to reproduce the perceived look of Anzac Cove. Few Sydney beaches look like this - but Tamarama does. Two later films use the same film footage of Tamarama as Gallipoli, *Spirit of Gallipoli* (1928) and *Within Our Gates* (1915).

### **'Rocky Nook': a headland home during the Great Depression**

The economic catastrophe that was the Great Depression of the 1930s severely affected Australia. In 1932 unemployment reached a record 29%, one of the highest rates in the world.

Waverley Council obtained government loans and grants to finance a program of public works under the Unemployment Relief Works Scheme. Many local improvements were undertaken during this time, including road works along Marine Drive, Tamarama and on the sandstone wall that supports it.

Large scale unemployment led to rent arrears and mortgage defaults, with countless people left homeless. Many of those evicted from their homes during the Depression set up camps on crown land, including along the coast. Temporary humpies were built along the cliff face from South Bondi to Tamarama, with the area described as a 'cave city'.

The coast's most famous Depression-era inhabitants were the Flanders family - Arthur (Perce), Eunice and their daughter Mary. They built a shack, 'Rocky Nook', which sat precariously on a rock ledge on the Mackenzies Bay side of Tamarama's northern headland for over 40 years. 'Rocky Nook' was 2m wide, 2.5m long and inside was 2m high, with one small window which faced the ocean.

The core of the building was the former Wonderland City pump house, which had been used to siphon water from the sea for Wonderland's aquarium. Perce Flanders used this deserted pump house to build a home, adding to it with any available building material. It had no water, electricity or sewerage, its only lighting was kerosene lamps. 'Rocky Nook' was finally destroyed by a wild storm in the 1980s.



*During the Great Depression road workers were employed under a government public work scheme to construct Marine Drive, Tamarama. In this 1935 photo the tunnel which once linked Tamarama Park with Tamarama Gully can be seen; despite a building boom at nearby Bondi by comparison Tamarama is still sparsely populated.*

### **Sydney's most dangerous beach?**

Tamarama Beach is only 100 metres long, and has been variously described as an embayed beach or a long inlet. But it is most notorious for its permanent rips, with the first recorded fatality at the beach in 1889.

In 1939 the Foundation President of Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club, George B. Philip, claimed Tamarama was no more dangerous than Bronte or Bondi, but conceded that, 'nearly all the year round the undertow, both north and south side where the rocks are partly submerged, is strong.'

Surf Life Saving NSW describes Tamarama as NSW's most hazardous patrolled beach, warning that its 'energetic wave climate ensures that at least one and often two rips are present on the beach. This means the surf zone is essentially all rip.' It rates Tamarama at 8, on a scale of beach safety from 1 (the safest) to 10 (the most dangerous).

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