

Bronte Park: 'A pleasure resort at Nelson Bay'



Earliest image of Bronte Park, a sketch by Georgiana Lowe, 1845-1849.

The sheltered gully at Bronte, with its permanent fresh water creek and waterfall, access to ocean food sources, as well as land animals, would have been well used by local Indigenous people.

Although no middens or carvings, such as those at Bondi and Tamarama, have yet been found at Bronte, Aboriginal people were well established throughout Waverley before European arrival.

There may be sites of Aboriginal significance in Bronte Gully, including those used for axe-grinding and engraving purposes.

Early expansion of the centre of Sydney to the eastern beaches was limited by a lack of transport routes, and there was little interest by the new European population in living in such a wild and remote environment.

It was not until 1836 that the first new arrivals started claiming land in the area, with William Mortimer Lewis, Colonial Architect, owning land which fronted Nelson Bay. His land included the whole of Bronte Park and the Gully, the shopping strip opposite the park and the area on which Bronte House stands. The property was known as the Bronte Estate.

Waverley Council had been petitioning the NSW government since 1863 to resume 14 acres on the beachfront at Bronte for use as a public park. In the mid-1880s there was a strong movement throughout NSW to create such parks, with many Sydney reserves dating from this period.

In 1885 Council wrote to the Government:

'In view of the attraction of Nelson Bay as a pleasure resort and the desirableness of securing some grassed land adjoining the beach for public use the Government is requested to obtain and dedicate for public recreation an area of three or four acres of Bronte Estate opposite the Bay.'

The following year the land was purchased and Waverley Council was appointed Trustees of Bronte Park. The park was proclaimed in 1887 and two further resumptions of land increased its size.

The waterfall in Bronte Gully fed a creek which ran across Bronte Park forming a series of pools, almost a lagoon. A bridge crossed the creek allowing access to the beach from the park. This creek ran parallel to the beach, then turned and ran across the beach, flowing out to sea at the southern end of the beach near the bogey hole.

The creek still runs, for many years it has been diverted into a storm water drain, coming out at the northern end of the beach. Under a new water-saving project Waverley Council will harvest water from the creek to irrigate Bronte Park and help regenerate the bush maintained by the Bronte Gully Bushcare Group.

The park now occupies the steep-sided Bronte Gully and part of the ocean foreshore; it has a large central lawn and a main picnic area. Remnants of the original Bronte House garden can still be seen in the park today, including Moreton Bay figs and giant bamboo.



Picnic in Bronte Park, 1912.

Bronte Park: a picnicker's paradise

By the 1910s summer picnickers were flocking to Bronte Park attracted by its grassy slopes, picnic shelters, shady Norfolk Island pine trees and ocean breeze.

A children's play ground with swings and a razzle-dazzle was later established, further increasing the park's popularity. On weekends the park was full of families, social and sporting groups, a situation which continues today.

From the 1940s to the 1970s a business in the park hired out striped canvas sun shelters and in photos from these decades the park can be seen dotted with tiny tents.

Like many local churches, for years the MacNeil Memorial Presbyterian Church at Bondi Junction held its annual Sunday school picnic in Bronte Park. Activities included classic Australian outdoor entertainment, most involving running of some kind: three-legged races, egg and spoon races and sack races.

In the 1960s the Australian Labor Party also held regular picnics in Bronte Park. As well as the standard races they also included Punch and Judy puppet shows and entertainers performing on the back of a table top truck.

One of the most loved and enduring of Bronte Park's features is the miniature railway, whose engine and carriages run on a 100-metre circular track at the southern end of the park.

Coleman & Son built the Bronte train in 1947 and it has now entertained generations of locals and visitors. The Coleman family owned the business until 1975 when it was taken over by Tom Hill.

Bronte Park is a popular destination on Christmas Day, particularly with international visitors, when the distinctive lattice work picnic shelters can be seen decorated with tinsel and festive ornaments.

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