

Mackenzies Bay: Waverley's mystery beach



In May 2007 a large sand 'dump' had turned Mackenzies Bay into a beach.



By November 2007 the beach at Mackenzies Bay was gone.

There is a quiet coastal nook between Bondi and Tamarama where every couple of years at the beginning of winter, almost overnight, a small cove suddenly turns into a beach. This small inlet is Mackenzies Bay which is normally just a rocky bay with no sand, popular with boogie board riders and sunbakers. Local surfers call it 'Maccas'.

Dogs are banned on all Waverley beaches, including Mackenzies Bay but as it is not officially a beach it is not patrolled making it popular with dogs and their owners. For this reason it is often known colloquially as 'dog beach'. Local myth has it that Mackenzies Bay becomes Mackenzies Beach every seven years. Its appearance is not as regular as this, but its mystery lies in never knowing when it will appear and just how long the beach will last.

Some years Mackenzies Bay has just a narrow strip of sand, other years it forms a deep beach and some years no sand appears at all and it stays just a rocky inlet. Many locals claim the ultimate year for Mackenzies Beach was 1997 when there was so much sand it was almost possible at low tide to walk between Tamarama and South Bondi.

This impressive showing was abruptly ended when a massive east coast cyclone pounded the coast in May that year and the beach disappeared overnight. This time however it didn't come back for 10 years. In May 2007 it made a dramatic reappearance, with other locals enthusing that there was more sand at Mackenzies Bay than there had been for 50 years. The beach was estimated to have been possibly 80 or more metres wide and 20 metres deep. By August it was gone, swept away by ferocious gales.

What causes Mackenzies Bay to turn into Mackenzies Beach? It is linked to seasonal change, with the beach appearing when there is a low-pressure swell with an offshore wind: these are winter conditions. Greg Skilbeck, a sedimentary geologist from the University of Technology, Sydney said the beach phenomenon occurred when waves swept sand onto the coast from nearby sandbars. "It is a common occurrence for sand to end up on the shore during winter when you have increased wave energy."

Dr. Rob Brander, a coastal geomorphologist from University of NSW believes that what makes the Mackenzies come back is complex. "Patterns of swell direction have a lot to do with it, but the amount of sand on our beaches is also linked to longer-term climatic cycles. During a La Nina phase we tend to get more storms, bigger waves and our beaches erode. During an El Nino event there are less storms, smaller waves and the beaches recover."

How did Mackenzies Bay get its name? From the 1860s to approximately 1926 two generations of the Scottish-born Mackenzie family ran Waverley Dairy on farmlands which stretched from near the corner of Bondi Road and Denham Street east to the coast and as far south as Gaerloch Avenue, Tamarama. Waverley Dairy was the largest and longest running of all the local dairies, with the contract to supply milk to Sydney Hospital. At one stage Waverley Dairy cows grazed in a big paddock overlooking the sea owned by the family – this is now Marks Park, Bondi. The cows are long gone, but the point at the end of Marks Park remembers its earlier bovine life, it is named Mackenzies Point.

Published by Waverley Library from sources in the Local History Collection, 2012.