

Reminiscences of Bondi by Thomas Ormond O'Brien

I believe I am the oldest native-born resident of Bondi, and, in consequence of the death recently of my brother Frank, the oldest resident. I was born in the old "Homestead" at Bondi, in the year 1851.

Approaching Bondi from Sydney, we came to "The Tea Gardens"-- the Tea Gardens' Hotel, kept by Mr. Hall Webb. It was probably called "The Tea Gardens" because the hotel stood back from the Old South Head-road, about a chain, and there was an enclosure of about half a rood between the hotel and the road -- (the Tea Gardens is now Bondi Junction). Up to this point the road from Sydney was called the "Old South Head-road." It is now Oxford-street, but keeps its old name in its continuance to South Head.

I would like here to refer to "Waverley House," because by father and mother lived there, with my grandfather, "Monitor Hall," about ninety-five years ago; this house was where Dr. Lamrock now lives. Here too was the approach by a narrow street to Waverley-street, the first road to Bondi. This narrow street is still there, but Waverley-street is now the Bondi-road, and joins the Old South Head-road about one hundred yards further towards South Head.

In the old days we walked to the Tea Gardens to join the "bus (fare one shilling); old Steve, the driver, a jolly looking old fellow in a white top-hat. Waverley-street for half its distance followed a very old road or track. My father's land blocked its course, so he gave land to let it pass through, and also a site for the Council Chambers (lately pulled down and a new one erected close by). Here we come to "Flagstaff Farm," at one time for property of Barnett Levy, who built "Waverley House." On the hill close by are buildings connected with the Water Board. The cricket-ground here was once a lagoon. On the northern side of the road dwelt "Scotch Mary," famed for her curative powers.

We pass on to Dickson's paddock, where lived the father of the late Thomas James Dickson, solicitor, with whom I went to the Sydney Grammar School. We here find Mr Dent, and the market gardens of Mr. Duffy, Mr. Knapp, Mr. Polly, and then we come to "Fletcher Glen," the residence of the well-known dentist, the late David Fletcher senior. Up to this point from the Tea Gardens we have been in Waverley.

We now proceed to Bondi, and after travelling half-a-mile, we come to "The Homestead." I have a map, prepared for my father by the late Edward Knapp in, I think, 1856, in which "The Homestead" building is the only one. It is marked by Mr Knapp "Bondi Lodge." There are tracings here of a dwelling having been here in the old days, and I recollect evident signs of a garden in the then flat about the tram-line between Hall-street and Lamrock-Avenue. By reason of the sea-sand being driven inland by the southerly gales, the water increased in depth from year to year, and ultimately became a lagoon, so deep that the tea trees sent out bunches of roots about six feet from the ground, and when the Bondi sewer drained the lagoon they died, the roots hanging in the air. I have seen a lagoon extending from this point to over the Old South Head-road and nearly to Rose Bay.

The main Bondi grant was made to William Roberts in 1810, in recognition of his laying out the Old South Head-road. By rights it should include some 3-7 acres odd to the north, as it is described as bounded by "Knight's Grant," but, when my father changed the title from the old system, bringing the land from "Dunstaffnage" to "Ben Buckler" under "Torrens," the Land Titles Office would not include the 3-7 acres, because the linear measurements along the Old South Head road did not reach Knight's grant.

The first 'bus to Bondi was driven by Omerod, one of "the gallant sic hundred." He was "a regular cure." He picked us up where O'Brien-street strikes the Old South Head road. My father paid him one pound five shillings a week, and he picked up all he could in addition. The only passenger on the bus, when we joined it each morning was Sir Watson Parker, from Watson's Bay, where the bus started. Bellevue Hill was called "Vinegar Hill" by the "old hands."

The old residents were Mr. Newman, of "Mamhead Lodge," and Mr. Williams, of "Anglesea Villa," on the Old South Head road; Mr Neal, broommaker; Mr Hercules Watt, and Mr Edward Ludlow Clarke, well known for his long grey beard, his speaking trumpet, and his little pony, "Jacky." He was an English solicitor, but probably from lack of hearing long given up practice. He was flooded out by the rising lagoon.

One easterly gale washed away the sand from the bay frontage, probably to an extent it had never done before, because it unearthed an aboriginal skull and several aboriginal tomahawks.

To such an extent was the locality regarded as "no man's land" that three woodcutters, cutting down the trees, refused to stop till my father gave them the option of having their traces cut or going – they went.

"Merriverie" is a basalt formation on the cliffs a little to the north of Ben Buckler. I know of five basalt formations commencing with this and ending at Port Hacking. But this is unique, for the reason that the weather has eaten into the centre of it. It is mostly a perpendicular cliff over one hundred feet high, and there is a mighty crack in the cliff over one hundred feet deep and about a quarter of a mile long. "Mud Island," a rock in the sea a few yards to the east of the mass is basalt. Another most attractive feature of this formation was that you came to the edge of the cliff from the west, turned round facing south, went down a short distance, having on your right and above you several-sided columns of heat-hardened free stone several feet long, the outer ones of which you could remove from the mass. Unfortunately, much of the beauty was spoiled as my father put a tramway from the Old South Head road, and carted away and broke up the stone for metalling the old and new South Head roads.

Another point of interest is the rough carving of a fish or fishes on the cliffs on Ben Buckler by the aboriginals. *I never saw any Spanish galleons carved there!*

I think I will wind up with a lament for the spoiling of that once – beautiful spot, "Long Bay," which you saw nothing of until you came out from under the surrounding trees, and came upon a beautiful, peaceful bay, with a little beach covered with pebbles and beautiful shells and occasional pieces of cornelian – whence the cornelian I do not know. I found black fellows' skulls and tomahawks here, too, and it seems to me "Merriverie" is the only basalt formation showing the basalt that the tomahawks must have come from there.

My father from the first used to tell us what Bondi would be in the future. He used to look upon the beach frontages in particular as "Guinea Gold" – a favourite expression of his. He was greatly attached to Bondi.

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