

Waverley's waterfalls



Photo caption: Tamarama gully waterfall and the wooden bridge built by David Fletcher to span the head of the waterfall. Late 19th century.

Tamarama Gully and its waterfall inspire an artist, a poet and a Mayor

Tamarama Gully was formed by a creek eroding an edge of the Hawkesbury sandstone plateau whose ridge sits at the top of Tamarama Gully. The creek begins in a catchment west of the gully, near present-day Waverley Park, and it cascades over the edge of the plateau making Tamarama Gully and its waterfall.

The creek originally ran the length of the gully, across present day Tamarama Park and out to sea. It still goes out to sea at Tamarama Beach, but now goes via an underground stormwater drain.

In 1876 the first Mayor of Waverley, David Fletcher, bought land at the top of Tamarama Gully. There he built a house, *The Glen*, with the whole area being

known for many years as Fletcher's Glen. It was also known as Fairlight Glen, named for another house Fletcher owned in the gully called *Fairlight*.

He built a wooden bridge over the top of the waterfall which would have afforded beautiful views all the way to the ocean. Fletcher gave pride of place to displaying the natural waterfall and the lush rainforest-type vegetation that flourished in the narrow protected gully. He fashioned steps and pathways across his land, providing picturesque walking trails. These pathways can still be seen, although they are now largely overgrown.

In 1878 Sydney magazine *The Australian Town and Country Journal* described Tamarama Gully as 'a lovely valley with its myrtle trees, hidden caves and bamboo and the flow of a creek across the valley'.

It captured the imagination of a local politician and amateur poet, Alfred Allen who, in 1876, inspired by a visit to Tamarama Gully penned the poem 'Fairlight Glen'. Waxing lyrically he enthused about the waterfall's 'wild and rugged nook, divided by a tumbling brook' and declaring the gully 'has a charm for every eye, a balm for every ache and sigh'.

In the early-1880s artist Julian Rossi Ashton was similarly enchanted. He was sent to sketch Tamarama Gully for *The Picturesque Atlas of Australia* and this commercial art job had a big impact on him; he fell in love with Tamarama, settled locally and continued to sketch and paint images of the gully for the rest of his life. Ashton's sketch for the *Atlas* titled 'Fletcher's Glen' is significant as it is the first known image of Tamarama Gully and waterfall.

In 1889 Ashton painted a small canvas of the gully as a present for Mary Anne Fletcher, the daughter of David Fletcher. On 25 November that year he wrote to her:

'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.'

Ashton is now remembered as a major artist and an exponent of Australian impressionism, known for taking his students on 'plein air' painting excursions to the Eastern Suburbs beaches.

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.'

In the late 19th century local historian Major William L. Johnston took the first photographs of Tamarama Gully. These evocative black and white images show a fast flowing cascade of water, dropping between large boulders and rock benches and Fletcher's rustic wooden bridge spanning the head of the waterfall - a sylvan glen indeed.



The first image of Bronte waterfall is this sketch by Georgiana Lowe c. 1845-1849. Courtesy of the State Library of NSW.

Bronte's waterfall 'a most romantic spot'

At the end of Bronte Gully a waterfall tumbles from a permanent spring, the first images of which go back to 1845. For at least 166 years, most probably much longer, Bronte's waterfall has been running constantly undoubtedly providing a regular fresh water supply for local Indigenous inhabitants.

The waterfall fed a creek which originally ran across Bronte Park forming a series of pools, almost a lagoon, with the area we now know as the park a large wet, marshy area.

The creek ran from the gully, through the park parallel to the beach, with a bridge across the creek giving access to Bronte Beach from the park. The bridge was located close to where the miniature train in the park now runs. The creek flowed out to sea at the southern end of the beach near the present day bogey hole.

The first images of Bronte, including the waterfall at the end of Bronte Gully are sketches made by Georgiana Lowe, wife of Robert Lowe, an English barrister and later NSW parliamentarian who bought the Bronte Estate, including Bronte House, as a country residence.

Her sketches are significant as they are the earliest images of Bronte Beach, Park and Gully, including Bronte's waterfall. The Lowe family remain one of Bronte House's most charismatic and remembered inhabitants, despite only being in residence for four years, 1845-1849.

Georgiana Lowe was a skilful artist and enthusiastic gardener. She played a major role in the initial landscaping of the Bronte House gardens, incorporating native and exotic plants into scenic walks. In a letter to her family in England she enthused about her new home: 'We have a little estate

of 42 acres, four miles from Sydney on the sea; it is lovely beyond conception. We have given only 420 pounds for it.'

To her mother, she writes: 'The scenery resembles Jersey, but is far more beautiful – the vegetation is so lovely. We have a beautiful bay to ourselves [Bronte Beach]; we have a waterfall of sixty feet and this runs through a fine valley [Bronte Gully]; it is a most romantic spot and just suits my tastes.'

Bronte creek still runs through the 'fine valley' and is still fed by the waterfall. For many years it was diverted into a storm water drain, coming out at the northern end of the beach via a large concrete pipe which can still be seen.

Waverley Council, under a water-saving project now harvests the water from the creek to irrigate Bronte Park, flush toilets and help regenerate the bush maintained by the Bronte Gully Bushcare Group.

Recently Waverley Council has addressed the degradation of the waterfall, which had become choked with illegally dumped material. Georgiana Lowe's sketches were a valuable tool in this project as it showed the waterfall in its original state. A working bee in early 2011 cleared 20 bags of garbage from the site and a re-design of the waterfall's pool has seen it return to its former romantic beauty.