

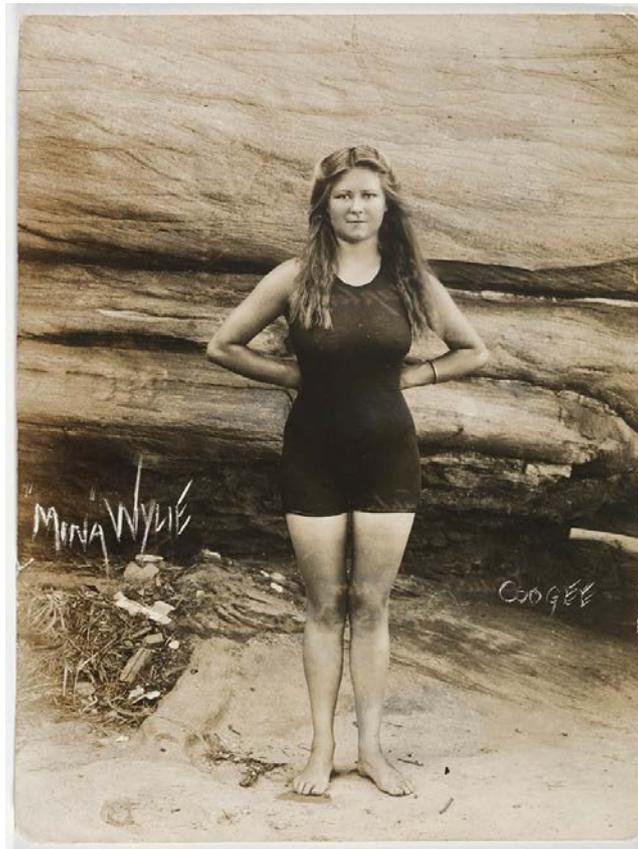
## Waverley's water women

It is unsurprising, given our glorious coastline, that Waverley has been home to, or a significant influence upon so many female swimmers. Some have just paddled recreationally, others have swum competitively and some gone on to international glory.

2012 is the centenary of the Stockholm Olympic Games, significant as the games where Australian women first competed in the Olympic Games in 1912, in Stockholm, when Fanny Durack and Mina Wylie entered the swimming events where they won gold and silver for Australia.

While these women could have easily been unfriendly competitors, they swam against each other consistently at swimming events as well as at the Olympics they were, in fact, great friends and supporters of each others swimming careers.

### Mina (Wilhelmina) Wylie (1891-1984)



*Mina Wylie, photo courtesy of the State Library.*

Mina Wylie, Australian pioneer and champion swimmer first learnt to swim at Bronte Baths. Her father, Henry Alexander ('Harry') Wylie, himself a champion long distance swimmer and diver, leased Bronte Baths from Waverley Council 1 November 1895 to June 1901.

Mina became Australia's first female Olympic silver medalist when she came second to Fanny Durack in women's 100m freestyle, still an extraordinary win as she started badly and had to work even harder to make up time during the race. She managed to pass all of the other swimmers to come in just behind Fanny Durack.

Mina had a long and highly successful Australian and international swimming career and went on to world-wide fame. Her amazing swimming ability is recognized by her inclusion in the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Florida. This centre is recognized by FINA, the international governing body of swimming, diving and water polo, as the official hall for aquatic sports.

### **Fanny (Sarah Frances) Durack (1889-1956)**



*Fanny Durack, photo courtesy of National Museum of Australia.*

Fanny became Australia's first female Olympic gold medalist when she won the women's 100m freestyle at the Stockholm Olympics in the then world record time of 79.8 seconds. This was the only individual event women could compete in.

Between 1912 and 1918 she went on to break 12 further world records and earn her place in the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Florida.

Since her death in 1956 Fanny Durack's final resting place has been Waverley Cemetery, fittingly overlooking the ocean. Her grave had been unmarked, overgrown and seemingly forgotten until Waverley Council set up a fund to buy a plaque to mark her grave and honour her contribution to Australian swimming. As well as money donated by Waverley Council funds were received from the NSW state government, local swimming and surf life saving clubs, Fanny's American niece and a former swimming pupil of Fanny's.

Three thousand dollars was raised and in 1990 her grave was restored and a new onyx headstone put in place. It reads:

In memory of Sarah "Fanny" Durack (Mrs. Bernard Gately) died 20 March, 1956, aged 66. First woman swimmer to win an Olympic gold medal, Stockholm, 1912. Held every world freestyle record from 100 yards to one mile.' Fanny's brother Frank is also buried in the same grave.

To even try to list the many other wonderful Waverley women of the water would be impossible, but here are a few more.

### **Bea (Beatrice) Miles (1902-1973)**

Bea Miles was a bohemian rebel and renowned Sydney eccentric. She grew up in a privileged family, was educated at the private girl's school 'Abbotsleigh' where she graduated with Honours in English. She studied medicine, then arts at university, but she left before graduation when an inheritance from her grandmother allowed her to escape her unhappy home life.

She took to the streets of Sydney becoming a high profile eccentric, well-known for hitching rides in taxis and refusing to pay the fare and reciting Shakespeare for a monetary donation. Throughout her life she was mainly homeless living on the street or in parks around the City of Sydney.

Bea was a very good swimmer and loved Bondi Beach, she was often seen there with a sheaf knife strapped to her leg which she said she kept there to protect her from a shark attack. There are unconfirmed reports which have her swimming from the headland at North Bondi to the Icebergs Club at South Bondi, which, if true, would make her the first woman to swim across Bondi Bay.

### **Jean (Viola Jean) Cocks (1915- )**

In January 1929, at only 13 years of age, Bondi's Jean Cocks won the 200 metres free style Australian Women's Championship amazing onlookers with her speed and powerful style. She was described by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as 'a rising star in the aquatic firmament' and also a 'child star'; because of her youth she was accompanied by a chaperone when she travelled to compete in swimming competitions.

Jean was such a good swimmer that at one stage she was only 1/5 second behind one of Fanny Durack's Australian records and she also became the 100 metre champion of Australia. Her times in the 100 metre race were only 3 seconds behind the world record.

At a Brisbane swimming carnival in 1931 her style was described as 'a fast powerful stroke that lifted her shoulders well out of the water' and she was able to retain her title of 100 yards Ladies Champion of Australia at the Australian National Swimming Championship. Jean was still competing the following year her times almost reaching an Olympic record.

Despite her amazing record Jean Cocks has almost become a forgotten woman of Australian swimming history, but we remember her as one of our pioneering water women.

### **Evelyn Whillier (1917-2004)**

Another famous local swimmer was Evelyn Whillier (née de Lacey). As an 18-year-old she represented Australia in swimming at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, two years later she won a gold medal at the 1938 Empire Games. After the Olympics Evelyn settled in Bronte and became a regular morning swimmer at Bronte Baths.

When Evelyn returned she settled in Bronte and became a Bronte Baths regular. Even in her late 70s she could be seen in the water at 5.00am daily, summer and winter, swimming several kilometres as part of her exercise routine.

She was an active member of the Bronte Breakers and the Bronte Amateur Ladies Swimming Club, coaching and giving swimming lessons for more than 40 years. She is credited with teaching two generations of locals to swim. When she was asked by an interviewer about life in Bronte she said "The beach, the smell of the surf and the sea, the walk back through the park – what more could you want in life?"

Waverley Council publicly honoured Evelyn Whillier's contribution to our local area by making her the first member of the Heroes Walk at Bronte Beach.

### **Margaret Whitlam (1919- )**

Margaret Whitlam (née Dovey) is best known as the wife of former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, but prior to her marriage she was a local Bondi girl and a champion swimmer. Margaret represented Australia at the 1938 British Empire Games in Sydney, was a member of the Bondi Amateur Swimming Club and competed in many NSW State championships becoming the Australian breast stroke champion in 1937.