

Battle Hill: Waverley Council goes to war over water



The initial source of fresh water for Sydney's first European settlers was from a small stream flowing into Sydney Cove. This stream, known as the Tank Stream, was a lifeline for these new colonists who were unaccustomed to this strange new land with its unpredictable and erratic rainfall.

As the population of Sydney grew and the city rapidly expanded west, the dwindling water supply soon became a serious problem for the city's residents. The Tank Stream became severely polluted and new water sources had to be found urgently. In 1824 Governor Darling appointee John Busby recommended that the water in the Lachlan Swamps, now part of Centennial Park, were suitable as new source of water for the city.

This water was to be piped to Sydney through an underground tunnel, or 'bore' and the new water scheme became known as Busby's Bore. Land at the point at which the Lachlan Swamps originated was set aside to protect the water from contamination at its source. This area became known as the Water Reserve and included the present day Queens Park, Centennial Park area and the land now used as Waverley Bus depot.

The Lachlan Swamps was a low lying marsh containing a plentiful supply of fresh clean water, and also a site of considerable significance to local Indigenous people.

The playing fields of Queens Park were on the outskirts of the Lachlan Swamp and were a wet marshy area. Across this land was a walking track popular with Waverley and Randwick residents which ran from the end of Bourke Street, across Queens Park and up the hill to Market Street, Randwick. It was, in effect, a short cut from Bondi Junction to Randwick. Residents and their carts and animals tramped right through this marshy area, sullyng the water of the Lachlan Swamps.

Mayor of Sydney, Charles Moore, identified this pedestrian traffic as causing pollution to the Water Reserve and demanded action to stop contamination of the city's water supply - Waverley and Randwick residents must stop using the track.

But locals had used 'their' track for over 20 years and refused to find another pathway. Special meetings of Waverley Council were called to discuss the matter and protest petitions were signed, but to no avail. The City of Sydney wouldn't back down, but neither would the residents.

On 30 September 1868 the City of Sydney took action. Waverley residents awoke that morning to find that workmen had advanced during the night and begun erecting a stout three-rail fence across the track, barring access through the scrub.

The locals contacted Council. Mayor David Fletcher was not prepared to take this lying down – together with another Councillor and the Council Clerk he rallied the Waverley forces. Five horses and carts were put into position to block the fence-building activities. As the opposing bodies faced each other across the obstacles, a considerable crowd gathered to watch and join in the heated debate. Things turned ugly and a huge brawl began.

Waverley locals broke the fence and threw it into a fire which had been started specifically for this purpose. The fence burned! Both sides armed themselves with broken bits of fence and other domestic implements. The police were powerless to halt the fight that raged on the corner of Bourke Street and Cuthbert Street. (Bourke Street used to end at this point and lead directly into Queens Park, the street has now been extended)

The Waverley forces were eventually victorious and the men from the City of Sydney began to retreat. The fight had caused great excitement amongst Waverley's residents and was an absorbing topic for many months. This area became known by the locals as 'Battle Hill'.

And Waverley has never had to go to war with the City of Sydney again. The war over water was won – by Waverley.

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