

Waverley celebrates its centenary, 1959

In 1959 Waverley celebrated its centenary, the area officially having come into being on 13 June 1859. In 100 years Waverley had developed from scattered settlements housing approximately 800 people to a residential district with 19,000 buildings, nearly 80 miles of road and almost 65,000 residents. Echoing a pattern which continues today, property values were growing rapidly with the value of unimproved capital land at £18,223,275, while the improved capital value was £79,553,372.



One of the main celebrations held for Waverley Council's centenary in 1959 was a formal dinner at the Rex Hotel, Bondi. In this photo the Governor of NSW, Eric Woodward (left) and Mayor Dudley Page (right) enter the hotel for the dinner

Bondi Junction was becoming one of the busiest shopping centres outside the Sydney CBD. Large city shops, such as department store giant Grace Bros. opened local branches to cater to the buying power of Waverley residents. As traffic congestion became an issue for the first time at Bondi Junction, provision was made for off-street parking for shoppers.

In 1959 Waverley had 17 schools with two of them having more than 1,000 pupils each. It had two local hospitals, the War Memorial Hospital at Waverley and the Eastern Suburbs Hospital, the latter having been used by the United States Navy as a base hospital during WW11. Moriah College now occupies this former hospital site. Since 1912 meetings had been held in the area to discuss building a local synagogue, but it was not until 1960 that the Central Synagogue opened in Bon Accord Ave, Bondi Junction.

At the beach: mermaids, bikinis and arrests

Bondi Beach was attracting huge crowds, with up to 100,000 on the beach in summer and more than 5,000,000 visiting annually.

At the northern end of the beach sculptor Lyall Randolph, inspired by the Little Mermaid statue in Copenhagen, created two mermaids in bronze coloured fibreglass. The models for these mermaids were Jan Carmody, Miss Australia Surf 1959 and Lynette Whillier, a champion swimmer and runner-up in the same competition. Randolph first tried to sell the idea to Waverley Council, but he was unsuccessful.

Undaunted, in April 1960 at his own expense, he installed them on the Big Rock at the foot of Ben Buckler, North Bondi. Despite an outcry from some members of the church that the statues were lewd, the Bondi mermaids soon became one of the area's most loved features and Big Rock was informally re-named Mermaid Rock.

At this time Bronte Beach was described as being 'tucked away in a secluded valley with a little natural glen, and shelter sheds attracting family picnickers'. Things were much quieter at Tamarama Beach which was described in 1959 as being 'popular with picnickers', but the beach 'much less frequented' than Bronte or Bondi.

Bikinis were the daring new beach fashion, but they remained controversial. In 1961, a 25 year old dancer Joan Barry was fined £3 for wearing an offensive swimming costume on Bondi Beach, the costume was described as being 'at least five inches below the navel'. She was also fined for calling a Waverley Council Lifeguard (then known as a Beach Inspector) who arrested her "a fool".

It wasn't only female beach fashion causing trouble. In the same year the Mayor of Waverley instructed Council's Lifeguards to make sure male swimmers did not offend against decency either. It seemed that, according to the Mayor, many men had taken to the beach wearing "nothing more than exaggerated jockey shorts".

New cultures: surf music and rock and roll arrive

In the 1950s and the 1960s a new generation started transforming Australian society. The rock and roll era had begun! In 1956, when Johnny O'Keefe grabbed the microphone, Australia got its first home-grown rock and roll icon. Particularly home-grown for Waverley, as Johnny was a local boy whose father Ray O'Keefe was Mayor in 1961-1962.

A new surfing culture had arrived on the beach and its youthful adherents had reconceptualised the beach as a site of unstructured recreation, a place of freedom and hedonism.

A group of teenagers from the Eastern Suburbs formed Australia's first big guitar band, The Atlantics, whose style was described as 'surf guitar'. Their single 'Bombora' was released in 1963 and became not only an Australian number one hit, but an international one, with America's Cashbox magazine choosing it as its 'Record of the Week'.

Dances at surf clubs were a popular form of entertainment, attracting not only local teenagers, but those from across Sydney. The most notable of these was the Sunday night dance at Bronte Surf Life Saving Club (SLSC) which regularly pulled huge crowds. The Delltones were at the height of their popularity and had a particularly close connection with the Bronte SLSC where they appeared regularly.

The Eastern Suburbs Leagues Club had just opened; operating in the now demolished Beach Court at North Bondi. With the support of Waverley Council the fledgling club was able to hire the first floor of the Bondi Beach Pavilion and it operated from there for a number of years.

Waverley on the national and international stage

The Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies and his wife Dame Pattie Menzies visited Waverley on 10 September 1960. It was the first time in the Council's history that a Prime Minister had paid an official visit. As a memento of his visit, Menzies was presented with a bound copy of the newly published Council-sponsored book *The History of Waverley Municipal District 1859-1959* written by former employee, Bernard T. Dowd.

During his visit Menzies joked that he was a "former Bondi boy," having lived in the area for a total of six weeks many years ago. Proving that he was indeed the true royalist history remembers him to be when Menzies visited the Eastern Suburbs RSL Club he presented them with a portrait of Queen Elizabeth 11.

In 1960 Waverley Council sent a congratulatory message to the new President of the USA, Senator John Kennedy. It read:

That the Council of the Municipality of Waverley in the State of New South Wales, Australia, desires by this means to convey to you hearty congratulations on your election as President of the United States of America; and expresses the fervent hope that God Almighty will guide you in the discharge of your duties for the welfare of the American Nation.

Waverley's celebrations for its centenary in 1959 included: a formal dinner at the Rex Hotel, church services, the planting of pine trees at South Bondi, sporting events, a garden competition, a festival of nations and an historical play put on by the Bondi Theatrical Society.

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