



WAVERLEY COUNCIL

BIKINI WARS



A Waverley Library Local History Fact Sheet

Although two piece swimsuits have been around since Ancient Rome (mosaics depicted found in the Villa Romana del Casale showed women wearing bandeau tops and shorts to compete in sports), the bikini as we recognise it is commonly credited to French engineer Louis Réard in 1946. However, the humble bikini has seen its share of controversy over the last 75 years.

In Waverley, bathing suits needed to meet stringent measurement requirements to be allowed on public beaches. *The Local Government Ordinance No. 52 (1935)* indicated that both men and women's costumes must have legs at least 3" long, must completely cover the front of the body from the level of the armpits to the waist, and have shoulder straps or other means

of keeping the costume in position. While it is impossible to say who was the first to wear the risqué bathing suit to Bondi Beach, there has been a history of arrests of women who dared to breach the 1935 ordinance on swimming costumes.

According to a *Sunday Telegraph* report in 1946, an unnamed woman braved Bondi promenade wearing a bikini and 'caused a near riot'. Waverley Council Lifeguard (then known as Beach Inspectors) Aub Laidlaw told her she was indecently attired and ordered her to the changing sheds at Bondi Pavilion with instructions to put on some more clothes. Later charged with offensive behaviour, this was just one of many events in the subsequent fight against 'public indecency'.



N.S.W. BEACH INSPECTORS' DINNER

HOTEL BONDI

FRIDAY, 22nd APRIL, 1955



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Aub Laidlaw later remembered that event in an interview with the *Daily Mirror*, 19 April 1984:

"I remember the first girl I ordered off was a medium sized brunette from Darren St, Lidcombe. The beach telegraph had got around before I caught up to her and the mob was round her. We had to escort her out the back door of the pavilion [Bondi Pavilion] to a tram."

Maybe sensing that they were fighting a losing battle Waverley Council debated the bikini matter at the Council meeting on 15 December, 1951. However, the Council voted to continue enforcing the *Local Government Act*.

By the 1960s, war was well and truly being waged on Waverley's beaches. Over the 1961 October long weekend, more than 50 unnamed women (some reports claim as many as 75!) were ordered from Bondi Beach because their swimsuits did not conform to regulations. These arrests were given extensive coverage by the media, who often staged the news stories themselves by 'planting' bikini clad models on the beach and then reporting the subsequent response by the Lifeguards. During this time the media coined the catchphrase 'the bikini war'.

Throughout the 1950s, other woman also fell foul of the *Local Government Act*, including Yvonne Freedman, and Hollywood film starlet Jean Parker. In an interview about his work in 1956 Lifeguard Bill Willis said that the Lifeguards resented having to act as dress censor, however it was their responsibility to enforce the *Local Government Act* on the beach. He said that it was demeaning to them as they were emergency service workers, not fashion police.

In October 1961 Joan Mary Barry, 25, a dancer and actress, was fined £3 at Paddington Court of Petty Sessions for wearing an offensive swimming costume on Bondi Beach.





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Images from top:

Beach Inspectors at Bondi.
Left to right, Bill Willis, Aub
Laidlow; Brian Davidson.

Beach girls on Bondi
Promenade, 1947. Norma
Weston, Monica Kelly, Patty
Jupp, Judith (Judy) Parnell.

Bathers on Bondi Beach, 1950

Bondi Beach Inspectors Dinner
flyer, 1955.

Cartoon by Les Tanner, *The
Bulletin*, October 1961.

Bathers on Bondi Beach, 1960.

The costume was described as 'at least five inches below the navel'; she was fined for refusing to resume 'ordinary dress' and calling apprehending Lifeguard Aub Laidlaw 'a fool'. A report of the case in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1961, claims that Barry's bikini had been confiscated and was available for viewing at Paddington Police Station.

It wasn't all women, though, in the battle of public decency. The Mayor of Waverley Alderman Ray O'Keefe said that he had instructed the Council's Beach Inspectors to make sure male swimmers were meeting the exacting standards of the *Local Government Act*. Reports in the *Sun Herald*, 29 October 1961 quote O'Keefe, "We are taking a good look at the men as well, and many of them have been sent off the beach for wearing exaggerated jockey shorts."

Later that year a rather novel solution to the bikini problem was proposed by Waverley Council Alderman J. Einfield. His suggestion was that women wearing two-piece swimsuits parade before members of Waverley Council and that "Aldermen could then judge if the bikinis were decent". In reporting the (unsuccessful) proposal *The Daily Telegraph* quipped, 'The Eyes Have It'.

By the end of 1961 the old *Local Government Act, Ordinance No. 52* was abandoned and a new ordinance introduced which simply required bathers be 'clad in a proper and adequate bathing costume' - without defining exactly what this was. Bikinis (and Speedos) were no longer deemed an affront to public decency.