

The Great Aussie Cossie: 1880s to today



The 1889 By-Law No. 145 of the Borough of Waverley declared: "Any person who, except in a public bath and proper bathing dress, shall bathe near to or within view of any inhabited house, reserve, or place of public resort, between the hours of 8 o'clock in the morning and 8 o'clock in the evening, shall be liable to a penalty not exceeding five pounds nor less than five shillings."

What constituted "proper bathing dress"? A fashion note of 1876 describes "a jacket and drawers of soft blue serge cut in one piece, with an added pelmet and belt...plain round sleeves, the elbows with a frill. The dress may be ornamented with white or coloured braid." The purpose of the early bathing costumes for ladies was to cover the body as much as possible. By 1896 "the tunic is cut almost to the knees. A wide frill forms the sleeves and trims the top of the jacket. Full knickers drawn in at the knee and wide frills complete the costume." Bathing caps were a necessary part of any bathing outfit, to prevent the problem of wet, untidy and unladylike hair.

By the turn-of-the-century surfing had grown in popularity and all the surf life saving clubs in the Waverley Municipality were established by 1906. In 1907, the Mayor of Waverley, Ald. R.G. Watkins, made an impromptu inspection of Bondi. "What we saw was disgusting. Some of these surf bathers are nothing but exhibitionists, putting on small trunks. They are in worse manner than if they were nude. But they won't continue doing it at Bondi Beach, not so long as I am mayor." The costume ordered by Waverley Council was "a guernesy with trouser legs reaching from the elbow to the bend of the knee, together with a skirt attached to the garment, covering the figure from hips to knees."

What followed was to become known as "the Bondi Burlesque"; a demonstration staged by beach-goers to parody the 'neck to knee' regulations, whereby bathers appeared wearing an absurd assortment of skirts, shawls and other outlandish garments. to show their impracticality.

The Australian Surf Costume of 1911 was "made regulation shape and buttons on shoulder. The costume that you can swim in...thick enough to be worn without V Trunks. Stocked in Navy, with coloured neck, sleeves and bottom. The average weight is 9 ounces. Price six shillings and six pence." After World War I, the one-piece bathing costume was pioneered by Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman in the U.S.A., but her costume was considered very daring. Most women wore knee-length stockings, rubber shoes and bathing caps, relieved only by loose kimonos and Japanese umbrellas. Their costumes of wool gave off a funny smell and remained uncomfortably damp for long periods.

In 1907 the Mayor of Waverley, Alderman R. G. Watkins, made an impromptu inspection of Bondi Beach and was horrified at what he found:

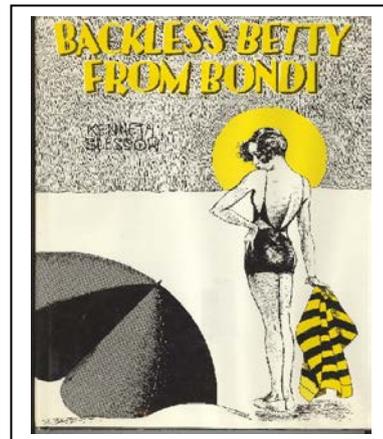
"What we saw was disgusting. Some of these surf bathers are nothing but exhibitionists, putting on small trunks. They are in worse manner than if they were nude. But they won't continue doing it at Bondi Beach, not so long as I am Mayor."

Famous last words indeed!

In the 1920s David Jones was advertising the "Orient One-piece Canadian Costume from ten shillings and six pence. A one-piece style which is quite the most popular this season." Mark Foy's, not to be outdone, in 1923 advertised: "Sill's One-piece Swimming Costumes, assuring a Joyous Freedom of Movement that is unique in Bathing Costumes."

In the late 1920s Australian writer Kenneth Slessor had fun in his poem 'Backless Betty from Bondi' imploring the Council and the Beach Inspectors to leave the Bondi bathing girls alone:

*'You aldermen who thunder out
Damnation for the Backless,
Your waists, no doubt, are rather stout,
Which makes you somewhat tackless;
And you, arch-bulldogs of the sand,
So big and brown and artless
Who put the bellow
In the banned –
Inspectors,
Don't be heartless!'*



With the end of the Depression's makeshift shabbiness, grooming became paramount. Women also took to daringly wearing slacks; beach pyjamas and tailored shorts became fashionable beach wear and a modest two-piece bathing suit appeared on the beaches displaying a few inches of bared midriff. Post-World War II swimsuits became briefer and better fitting and showed off figures better than ever before. Beach fashion was going through a revolution. After the one-piece costume parted in the middle, the expanse between waist and leg got smaller and smaller. By 1951 it was measured at 2.5cm and the bikini appeared that summer on Bondi Beach for the first time. Beach Inspectors had the thankless job of policing fashion, prowling the beaches with tape measures. Ten years later, bikini wearers were still being ordered off the beach.

Over one weekend in October 1961, 50 girls were sent from Sydney beaches for wearing 'offensive' bikinis. The debate continued at local government level, culminating in one of the most creative solutions ever put to Waverley Council to decide what constituted decent, or indecent, swimwear. In 1961 Alderman J. Einfield proposed that women wearing bikinis parade before Waverley Aldermen and that "Aldermen could then judge if the bikinis were decent." In reporting the proposal *The Daily Telegraph* quipped 'The Eyes Have It'.

By the end of the year the NSW Government announced that it would abandon local government ordinances prescribing minimum dimensions for swim suits, and that a new ordinance would simply provide that bathers should be 'clad in a proper and adequate bathing costume.'

The tussle against topless bathers became the next cry of battle. Churchgoers of 1978 signed petitions requesting that the beach inspectors should enforce the "rules of decent attire" on Bondi Beach and "restore Bondi's reputation as a family beach". Waverley Council made a unanimous decision, however, that no action would be taken against topless bathers using the southern end of Bondi Beach, south of the storm-water channel.

What can we dare expect in future beach fashion stakes?

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