

Who lived in my house?



Discovering your home's social history

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Every house has a social history. Unless you are living in a brand new home, other people have lived in your house before you did. Originally someone built it; later residents cared for it and over the years may have made changes to the building. Children may have been born there, grown up in the neighbourhood, played in your backyard and gone to the local school. During two World Wars sons and fathers may have patriotically left your house, intending to return as heroes. Some did; others never returned to their childhood and marital home.

So your house is part of the history of your street and your street is part of the history of your suburb. Researching your home's social history i.e. finding out who lived in your house before you, is fascinating and can be completely engrossing. This guide will help you research your house's social history however, it does not address the built history of your house.

There are two main sources used in researching a house history:

1. **Sands Sydney Directory:** Available online through the City of Sydney, <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/search-our-collections/sands-directory>
2. **Waverley Council rate and valuation books:** Archived in the Local Studies collection

The Sands Sydney Directory

John Sands & Company published *The Sands Sydney Directory*, commonly referred to as *Sands*, annually from 1858-1859 until 1932, with the exception of the years 1860, 1862, 1872, 1874 and 1881.

Sands lists who lived in a particular house, in a particular street, at a particular date, much like a phone book does today. In short, it lists occupancy. *Sands* does not reveal whether the occupier of the property was the owner – just as our present phone books do not reflect this kind of information. Ownership of property is established by using Waverley Council rate books and how to use them is discussed later in this document.

Each issue of *Sands* lists householders, businesses, public institutions and officials for Sydney and its suburbs, making it an important resource for researchers.

Sands is now available electronically, also a print out of the Waverley section of the *Sands Sydney Directory* is available in the Local Studies collection. In addition the genealogical website Ancestry.com has the Alphabetical section of *Sands* online. Ancestry.com is available on the public access computers in the Reference section of Waverley Library. *Sands* is also available in most public libraries on microfiche; Waverley Library holds a fiche copy of all available issues.

The two major sections of *Sands* are the Alphabetical and the Suburban sections. The first section consists of a single alphabetical sequence of the names of

householders, business houses and major organisations, with the address of the associated premises attached. The Suburban section provides similar information arranged either by suburb, locality or Local Government Area; keep in mind that the format of *Sands* changed over its 74 years of publication.

In the early years of *Sands* the Suburban Directory consisted, like the Alphabetical section, of a single alphabetical list of names for each given area. It is in effect a directory of residents, listing the primary householder in every street. The type of information typically included is the householder's name, usually male, and sometimes their title and sometimes their occupation, or the type of business carried on at that address.

Entries in *Sands* can include a combination of any of the following: full name, initials only, a job title and a house name:

Birrell Street – south side

- 2 Domanski, D. 'Beagleville'
- 4 Bathur, L. Dressmaker, 'Hill Top'
- 6 Cook, Bernard

Sands also had a Trades Directory arranged by the name of the trader. As a tradesperson had to pay to be listed, this is not a comprehensive list of those in each trade, just those who wished to be listed in *Sands*. After 1897 a Pastoral or Country NSW Directory was included.

How to use *Sands*

The best way for a new researcher to use *Sands* is to start with the last year, 1932, and work backwards. At this date a house number will almost always be shown, unlike earlier listings which do not have a street number or a house name.

It is useful to note the neighbours on either side of your property, as well as the cross streets nearest your property, this can assist locating a house when less information is given in the earlier editions of *Sands*. The first year in which a property appears in *Sands* may be considered an indication of it being developed about 12 months earlier.

Sands is arranged by Local Government Area (then called municipalities) in which the property was located. Remember that local government boundaries shift and can bisect streets, with one side of the street in one LGA and the other side in the other. This is true in Waverley with its boundary with the Woollahra Local Government Area.

First choose the relevant Municipality in the suburban section of the index i.e. Waverley, which is on the first microfiche for each year. When searching properties in the northern part of the Waverley LGA, it is important to keep in mind that Vaucluse was a separate local government area from 1895 to 1948.

A suggested searching methodology

- Determine the address of your property, finding the relevant street from those listed for your suburb; streets are listed alphabetically. The more information you have before you start, the easier your search will be e.g. what is the street name, street number (or house name), the physical location of the property in relation to the street i.e. is it on a corner, on the north or south side of the street and between which cross streets?
- Before 1884 listings are alphabetical by the name of the resident – surname, then first name – then their address is listed. After 1884 this is reversed, listings are alphabetical by street name, then the name of the resident is given.
- Street numbers are often not used in the earliest editions of *Sands*, if there is no street number for your property look for a house name. Note any information you have on any previous occupants of the property.
- Compare house numbering or location within a street, to determine your property's physical address and its occupants. Intersecting streets are an important identifier in *Sands*, they are used to show the location of the property in the street i.e. between two particular cross streets.

Troubleshooting

- Some street names which seem to 'disappear' at a certain point, or streets which were known to exist sometimes are not listed in *Sands*. There are a couple of reasons why this happens:
 - Street names change e.g. Beach Road, Bondi Beach was known as Matilda Street until 1936, so despite it existing for the entire period of the publication of *Sands* the name Beach Road does not appear in any edition;
 - If there are no residents in properties in a street there will not be a *Sands* listing for that street as *Sands* records occupiers of dwellings, if there is no resident there is no listing, this does not mean that a property physically does not exist;
 - *Sands* was concerned with occupied premises, so the existence of unimproved property frequently was unrecorded.
- Caution should be exercised, sometimes what appears to be the first listing for a property may in fact be the first listing after a period, sometimes lengthy, of omission from *Sands*. This can occur if the property is vacant for some years.
- There is no street numbering in the earliest years of *Sands*. Street numbering is introduced progressively in the later editions. Remember that street numbering may change as properties are subdivided. Identify properties by location or house number.
- The listings generally only include one member of the household, usually whoever is deemed to be its 'head' and does not include other people living at the same address.
- House names change regularly. Identify your property by its location not just by its name.
- Sometimes the *Sands* listing will give an indication of the use of a property e.g. 'motor garage', sometimes it does not.
- Re-subdivisions of a property are often difficult to identify using *Sands*.

- *Sands* is not a legal document. The information in it was collected by agents who called door-to-door; it is therefore open to error and it is only as good as the accuracy of the agent. In some instances, *Sands* agents may not have been able to collect information about a building e.g. it may have been vacant for some years, hence no listing in *Sands* or the householder absent, or unwilling to give information to the agent when they called.
- A house will usually have been built the year before it is first listed in *Sands*, which was published in January of each year, compiled from information collected the previous October.
- *Sands* ceased publication after 1932, replaced by the earliest Sydney phone directories. Copies of these directories are held in the State Library of NSW.

Waverley Council rate books

During the second half of the 19th century Council rates were levied on the basis of the assessed annual value of real property, so to calculate and collect rates involved assessing the value of a property. Such assessment was made annually by every council in Sydney. Rate books and valuation books give unique information about home ownership and property values in Waverley. They are of most research value when used in conjunction with other sources, such as *The Sands Sydney Directory*.

The Waverley Council rate books tell who owned a particular property at a particular date. After 1906 the rate books show a distinction between unimproved and improved capital value, this is very helpful in pinpointing the date of initial building on a lot of land. If there is a substantial rise in value, this can show further development on that block of land – such as the extension of a home, or further buildings built on that block.

There is also the value of the property as assessed by the Council. An assessment is made on the capital value of vacant land. With improved land, however, an estimate is made of the gross annual value of the property concerned. This latter estimate is intended to correspond more or less with the average gross returns in the form of rent that might reasonably be obtained in a period of twelve months.

Searching the rate books on microfilm 1860-1930

Waverley Council holds rate books on microfilm, from the first rate books in 1860 through to 1930, in the Reference section of Waverley Library. These can be used whenever the Library is open. Rate books after 1930 are not microfilmed and to access these later rate books an appointment is required with the Local Studies Librarian.

The rate books on microfilm are organised first by ward, then alphabetically by street name within that ward. So, to find your property first determine in which ward your property is located. You can do this by checking your street name by ward on the Waverley Council website, under 'Residents,' 'Online Maps,' 'Administration Boundaries.' Then, find your street within that ward. The earliest rate books were handwritten and the hand writing can be difficult to read. Often there is a street index at the front of the rate book, so check at the beginning of the microfilm. This index will give a page number for each street, this is the entry point for property listings for that street. This type of index disappears after the early years of the 20th century.

The 1930-1965 rate books are very frail and require minimal and specialist handling. It is not possible for you to handle the rate books, but information can still be retrieved from them for your property research by the Local Studies Librarian. Rate books from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are organised in large printouts alphabetically by name, so it is not possible to search for a property by address, it is necessary to know the owner of the property. An appointment is necessary for this stage of your research.

Waverley Council's wards

The question of the assessment and valuation of properties in Waverley was decided by Council at its meeting on 18 August 1859. This was Council's first attempt at property valuation. An interesting account of how property values were determined can be found in the Waverley Council minutes of this meeting.

Wards in Waverley were established in December, 1859 when Council resolved to divide the local government area into three wards: Bondi, Waverley and Nelson. This decision was gazetted on 22 February 1860.

In April 1887 a new ward was gazetted called Lawson and the boundaries of the three other wards were adjusted. A new North Bondi ward, Hunter ward, was proclaimed in 1927 and encompassed the northern part of the formerly very large Bondi ward. The last year of Nelson ward was 1950, it then became part of Lawson ward from 1951.

Building Register Files and Development Application Files

Some early Waverley Council building register files and development application files have survived, not all have done so as these records are usually destroyed after their legislative requirements for their keeping have been met. To check if any Council files for your property are held please contact the Customer Service Centre, 55 Spring Street, Bondi Junction. Phone: 9386 8000 or email: info@waverley.nsw.gov.au

Further reading

Local History: a guide to NSW local government minute books and rate records by Joy Hughes, the Royal Australian Historical Society, 1990.

State Records, Archives in Brief no. 109 'Valuation Records'. Available online: www.records.nsw.gov.au