

Bondi Beach Riot, 1884



*Bondi Beach - c. 1888 - Looking north Ben Buckler Headland
Cliff House Hotel (demolished 1922 - the Astra Hotel was built on the site)*

The southern end of Bondi Beach was a favourite spot for picnickers in the 1880's; these being the days before surf bathing, when adults could do little more than paddle "fully rigged in pants and shirts". They would arrive in their spring carts and delivery vans and the horses could graze the grassy slopes amongst the ti-trees and honeysuckle.

This peaceful summer scene was disturbed on Boxing Day 1884. According to the Sydney Morning Herald: "A disgraceful fracas occurred at Bondi yesterday. The pretty little village was crowded with visitors, and amongst them were some members of the larrikin type." Having quenched their thirst in the Cliff House Hotel (now the site of the Astra), a group of drunken rowdies descended upon the Bondi Dance Hall, located opposite the hotel. A row, begun over a young woman, came to blows and their mates joined in the fray. The hall had been decorated with gum saplings and these were pulled down and used as "waddies". The fight developed into a real "ding-dong go" - the women partisans joining in, tearing at each others hair and clothing.

Senior Constable Stapleton and Constables Gray and Stove were on duty and immediately went to quell the disturbance. The crown turned on the police and chased them from the hall into the scrub where they were caught and badly beaten. The officers were later seen at the Waverley Police Station, their "white pants covered in blood and their heads bandaged". A bystander named Harrison Kerwan went to the assistance of the police but was himself severely injured. Eventually police reinforcements arrived from the city to find the whole locality in an uproar and several rioters were arrested. The Bondi riot gave rise to the battle cry of "Give 'em Bondi!"

John Jones, James Kelly and Michael Healy went to trial on 26th March, 1885, and were sentenced to eight years imprisonment each on the charge of maliciously wounding Constable Stove, and five days later were sentenced to two years hard labour for riot.

Local residents sent a petition to Waverley Council claiming the dance pavilion to be a "nuisance and annoyance to the inhabitants" and this resulted in "the license granted to Mr John Henry for Dancing Pavilion at Bondi for the year 1885 be cancelled."