

Bronte's Beach on Nelson Bay



Bronte Beach, 1959

Bronte Beach used to be almost twice the size it is today, a huge stretch of sand which extended as far back as the mouth of Bronte Gully. Early sketches and photos of the beach show a deep sand beach covering much of the land occupied today by Bronte Park.

Between 1914 and 1917 the sea wall, and the promenade on top of it, were constructed as part of a Bronte Beach improvement scheme. This effectively cut the beach in half, with the area now behind the promenade being drained, filled in and turfed becoming part of Bronte Park.

Interestingly this reduced beach size was championed by real estate agents in a 1915 advertisement for land sales in Bronte. They enthused about the nearby beach, hinting that size equalled exclusivity:

'The beach itself is not large, and for this reason the excellent and enjoyable bathing and surfing it affords is doubly appreciated for the additional selectness and privacy in consequence.'

Stormwater at the southern end

A stormwater drain at the southern end of the beach was built in 1918, to drain water from Bronte Park. It exited onto the beach, emptying almost straight into the bogey hole and often polluting this popular swimming location.

The stormwater outlet was a dangerous, but attractive, spot for local children to play and in October, 1961 was the site of a dramatic rescue. Huge seas pounded Bronte and a group of children playing on the beach near the entrance to the stormwater outlet were caught by a large wave and washed back up the drain. They were carried down the pipes

which ran underneath Bronte Park.

Waverley Council lifeguards and Bronte surf lifesavers crawled up the pipes and followed its two branches, eventually finding and bringing back alive all six children.

Bronte's bogey holes

There are two bogey holes at Bronte, one of which was a popular bathing place before the Bronte Baths were built. Bogey holes are pools made of rings of rocks, with 'bogey' believed to be derived from an Indigenous word.

The bogey hole adjacent to the Bronte Baths was originally known as the men's bogey hole; between 1904 and 1908 rocks were cleared to extend this swimming place. The second bogey hole, on the beach itself, is more well-known and was originally created for women and children. In April 1916 the Bronte Progress Association wrote to Waverley Council requesting the removal of rocks from a natural rock shelf at the southern end of the beach, in order to provide a safe bathing place for women and children. This was the birth of the bogey hole.

A cave at the north

A beautiful long cave, loved by locals for its permanent shade in summer and beautiful sandstone, is one of the hidden gems of north Bronte. It is located near the stairs which run from the promenade to the upper part of Bronte Park. It is speculated that this cave might have been used by local Indigenous people.

The Bronte express

In NSW in 2006-2007, 110 people lost their lives as a result of drowning, even more suffered spinal injuries in the surf. Many were caught in rips. Of these, most were male, and almost a quarter were in their 40s.

At Bronte Beach there are usually two to three rips present, one at either end against the headlands, and a third in the centre. One famous rip is nicknamed the 'Bronte Express' - giving a sense of how fast it moves! This permanent rip runs against the southern headland, catching unsuspecting swimmers and washing them out behind Bronte Baths within minutes.

What is a rip? A rip is a strong current of water running out to sea. It is formed by waves washing on to the beach and then surging back along a channel beyond the breaking surf. Rips flow faster at low tide, making them more dangerous. Surf Life Saving NSW rates Bronte at 7, on a scale of beach safety from 1 (the safest) to 10 (the most dangerous). It advises, 'As far as swimming goes, Bronte is not the safest beach by any means.'

Rips do not pull you under the water they carry you seaward, but with a typical rip flowing faster than an Olympic swimmer and most east coast beaches having an average of five rips per kilometre –swim between the flags!



Bronte Beach, World War II

Bronte invasion!

Following the shelling of Bondi and Rose Bay by Japanese submarines in June 1942, defensive measures were placed on all Sydney beaches. It was believed an invasion via the NSW coastline could be imminent.

At Bronte Beach barbed wire covered the sand from the promenade to the surf. Heavy seas buried some of the wire and steel posts, which for years after World War II proved a particular hazard for surfers.

Searchlights were positioned on the hill at the northern end of the promenade and machine guns were placed in front of the Bronte Surf Life Saving Club (SLSC) and Bronte Baths.

A rotunda built by Waverley Council in the 1920s, which had been located in the centre of the beach and used for concerts, was dismantled at the military's request. There was concern that it interfered with the gunner's line of sight.

During the war, the lessees of the dressing sheds adjoining the SLSC, the Brown family, had to take down the shed's three flagpoles and remove the sign 'Bronte Dressing Sheds', apparently to confuse the Japanese when, and if, they arrived.

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