

Waverley's urban myths



Bronte Beach was not named after the Bronte literary sisters, but for a military battle won by Horatio Nelson, 1st Viscount Nelson, and 1st Duke of Bronte.

Waverley has its own urban myths, stories of obscure origin with little or no supporting evidence which are repeated so often they take on the status of a real event. We also have a uniquely Waverley variation of the urban myth, which Local Studies Librarian, Kimberly O'Sullivan, has termed 'the Bondi distortion factor'. In this variant anything which happened on a beach anywhere in Australia is deemed to have happened at Bondi. Despite the tens of thousands of beaches along the enormous Australian coastline it seems that a story is all the greater if it happened on Bondi Beach.

Here are some of our most common urban myths and the real facts:

Myth: Aviator Charles Kingsford Smith was one of the people rescued on Bondi's 'Black Sunday'

On 6 February, 1938 the biggest mass surf rescue in Australian history took place at Bondi Beach. In a day of unprecedented drama, approximately 250 were rescued, 35 were unconscious and ultimately there were five deaths. The day has been known ever since as 'Black Sunday'. A regularly repeated myth is that Charles Kingsford Smith, as a young boy, was rescued that day.



Fact: On 2 January 1907 lifesavers on Bondi Beach did rescue 9 y.o. Charles Kingsford Smith, (then simply known as Charles Smith) along with his cousin Rupert Swallow. The two boys had been caught in a rip and were being pulled away from the shore. The boys panicked, struggling to stay afloat in the surf. It was a near

brush with death for Charles, he was unconscious when brought in to shore, but recovered after resuscitation.

Ironically Charles Kingsford Smith did end up dying in the ocean when, in 1935, his plane crashed into the sea somewhere off the coast of Burma. However this was three years before Bondi's infamous 'Black Sunday'.

Source: *The Bondi Lifesaver: a history of an Australian icon* by Sean Brawley.

Myth: Prince Charles on a visit to Australia was spontaneously kissed by a bikini-clad girl on Bondi Beach

Fact: In 1979 Prince Charles on a visit to Australia was kissed by a bikini-clad model Jane Priest but this took place on Cottesloe Beach, Western Australia. This was not a spontaneous event, but a media set up. On an earlier visit to Australia, in

November 1977, Prince Charles did go surfing at Bondi Beach, but he remained un-kissed. (Photo: Prince Charles at Bondi Beach in 1966)



Source: On 2 March 2005 in an interview with the ABC radio news program *AM Prince Charles* expressed his gratitude to the people of Perth for the warm welcome he had received during his visit.

He reflected on his trip to Cottesloe Beach, Western Australia, in 1979, when he was ambushed by the model, Jane Priest. "Apart from having the most marvellous recollections of my previous visits here in years gone by, recollections of swimming very early in the morning down the beach when one or two people were detailed off to run up from the surf and do unmentionable things to me."

Myth: Artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the North Bondi headland in fabric as a public art installation

Fact: In 1969 avant-garde artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped a headland at Little Bay in fabric as a public art installation, reputedly making the largest artwork produced anywhere in the world.



Source: *Weekend Australian Review*, 26-27 September 2009 p. 6 and numerous 1969 contemporary newspaper reports.

Myth: Bronte is named after the English literary sisters the Brontës

Fact: One of the most common misconceptions about Bronte is that the area was named for the English literary sisters, the Brontës. This is untrue, as is another common myth, that one of the early owners of Bronte House, Robert Lowe, named the area after his home. In fact the suburb's name is much more dramatic.



In 1799 British troops, led by Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson, captured Bronte in Sicily and the King of Sicily bestowed upon him the title 'Duke of Bronte in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies' and gave him lands on the island. Sicily's Bronte is located slightly northwest of Mount Etna, near the Simeto River. Nelson is remembered as a powerful and charismatic military figure, famous for his participation in the Napoleonic Wars, most notably in the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar during which he was killed.

Nelson was adored throughout the British Commonwealth and his death was dramatic news across the world. He is remembered locally, not only in the name of Bronte (the suburb and the beach), but in Trafalgar Street, Nelson Avenue and Bronte Road. The bay fronting Bronte Beach is Nelson Bay.

Source: *Bronte: the birthplace of surf lifesaving* by Stan Vesper; *History of the Waverley Municipal District* by B. T. Dowd; *Biographies of Horatio Nelson*.