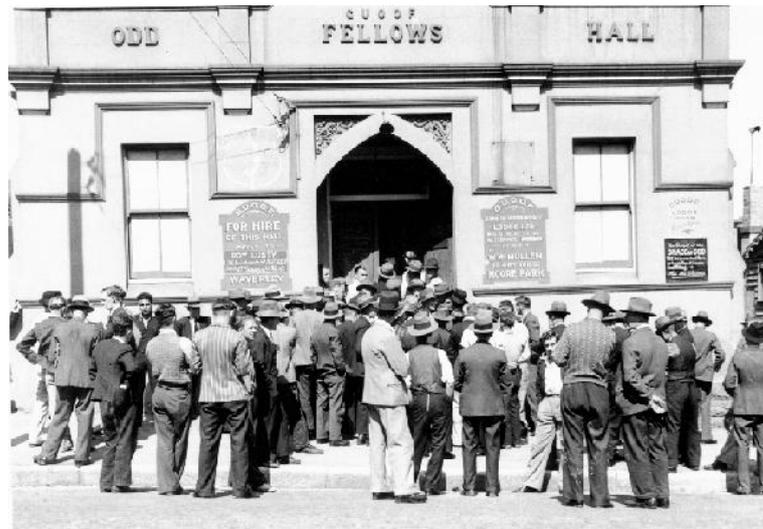


The Great Depression, 1930s



Men queue for assistance at Charing Cross during the Great Depression, 1932.

On 24 October 1929 the stock exchange on New York's Wall Street 'crashed'. The economic catastrophe that followed, known world-wide as the Great Depression, severely affected most countries of the world, including Australia.

Even before this devastating stock market crash in the USA, unemployment in Australia was already at 10 per cent. After the crash unemployment more than doubled, by mid-1930 it was at 21 per cent, reaching its peak in mid-1932 when almost 32 per cent of Australians were out of work. The impact on Australian society was devastating.

How was the Waverley area affected by this international financial crisis? Locally large scale unemployment led to rent arrears and mortgage defaults. A revision of valuations of rateable property was introduced so that 'the benefit of any reduction in rate may be received to the year 1933, and to obtain benefits of the Rents Reduction Act'. Many families had to apply for an extension of time to pay their Council rates.

Waverley's 'cave city'

Despite this many people lost their homes and some of those set up camps on Crown land, including along the coast. Temporary humpies were built on the cliff face from South Bondi to Tamarama, with the area described as a 'cave city'. Homeless families lived in conditions of great hardship and discomfort, making do in tents, dilapidated shacks and makeshift dwellings. These homes were often constructed from anything free and handy - corrugated iron, hessian bags, driftwood and cardboard and had poor heating and sanitation.

The coast's most famous Depression-era inhabitants were the Flanders family – Arthur (Perce), Eunice and their daughter Mary. They built a shack they named 'Rocky Nook', which sat precariously on a rock ledge on the Mackenzies Bay side of Tamarama's northern headland for over 40 years. The dwelling was approximately 2 metres wide, 2.5 metres long and inside was only 2 metres high, with one small window which faced the ocean.

The core of the building was the former Wonderland City pump house, which had been used to siphon water from the sea for Wonderland's aquarium. Perce Flanders used this deserted pump house to build a home, adding to it with any available building material. It had no water, sewerage, or electricity, with the only lighting being provided by kerosene lamps. 'Rocky Nook' was finally destroyed by a wild storm in the 1980s.

Being self-sufficient

In 1932 it was announced that 'a public meeting was held to form a Fund to purchase vegetables for issue to necessitous cases' and that the Vegetable Fund would arrange concerts at Bondi Beach Auditorium (the Bondi Pavilion) as a money raiser 'for the relief of distressed citizens within the Municipality'.

Women were urged to grow vegetables in their backyards and to keep poultry to help their families be more self-sufficient and reduce food costs. Hungarian goulash, made with cheaper cuts of meat, became a popular dish. In the streets the cry 'rabbit-o' could be heard from vendors selling fresh rabbits which made a cheap and nutritious meal. However this home delivered rabbit did have a slight disadvantage – residents had to endure the skinning of the rabbit on their doorstep.

Congratulations were offered by Waverley Council to local police in November 1932, for the 'humanitarian measures' adopted in providing food and shelter for a family evicted from their home in Tamarama Street, Bondi.

Local relief efforts

The outdoor pavilion in Waverley Park was used as a Relief Depot, but winter's wet weather brought complaints and the venue was changed to the indoor comfort of the hall of the Waverley Congregational Church in Botany Street. A soup and clothing depot was suggested for Fletcher Street when the control of the Soup Depot at 180 Bondi Road passed to the Worker's International Relief organisation

The unemployed also helped themselves, notably through the formation of the Waverley-Bondi Unemployment League. This organisation was permitted by the council to hold 'street drives' through the district in an attempt to raise extra funds to support the unemployed. These drives soon became weekly collections in the commercial precincts of the municipality.

While the economic crisis was mainly seen as a national issue, Waverley Council felt it was necessary to act and obtained government loans and grants to finance a programme of public works under the Unemployment Relief Works Scheme. Many local improvements were undertaken during this time - roads were constructed, graded and sealed, including road works along Marine Drive, Tamarama, and the sandstone wall that supports it. Parks were regraded, Bondi's wading pool was constructed, improvements were done to the sea wall along the coast and the Eastern Suburbs District hospital was built.

In 1934 Council proposed a programme of works anticipating the employment of '450 men weekly under relief conditions for approximately six months'. Relief works were extended to 'enable local government bodies to carry out suitable works as a measure of relief over the Christmas period'.

In the same year Waverley Council also urged a 'supply of blankets by the government of all men and women engaged on Emergency Relief Works' and 'a supply of boots and clothing to persons in necessitous circumstances'. A portion of Waverley Park was placed at the disposal of an officer of the Department of Labour and Industry for the issue of government rations.

The Council Minutes of 6 September 1932 refers to the reduction of the basic wage for all council employees: salaries of adult males were reduced by 12/6d per week and female salaries by 6/6d per week.

The beach as a haven

Through the Depression, Australians made icons out of those that offered distraction from the economic situation. Donald Bradman and Phar Lap provided it on the sports fields, Bondi provided it in its natural environment. The 1930s made the Australian premise of egalitarianism real and nowhere more so than in Bondi. During the worst period of the Depression, newspapers reported crowds of up to 100,000 people on Bondi.

The beach became a haven for the city's poor with large groups of unemployed people walking to Bondi from Paddington and Charing Cross. Government and social service agencies encouraged this practice in the belief that the beach environment would be a tonic for both the psychological and physical ills of this financial crisis.

It was in this period that the Bondi Icebergs were founded. It was one way for local surf lifesavers to keep fit during the winter months as local surf lifesavers numbered among Waverley's unemployed. For many this gave them more time to devote to their home clubs and the clubrooms themselves became a refuge during the week.

Historical photographs and documents show carnivals at Bondi Beach at this time with people doing all sorts of quirky things – gymnastics, jujitsu tournaments, contests, Wild West Shows - all celebrating the magic and diversity of beach life and seeking an escape from the harsh reality of life.

A curious phenomenon of the Depression years was the fantastic proliferation of miniature golf courses. The craze swept America and reached Australia towards the end of the 1930s. A miniature golf course was crammed with all sorts of strange obstacles and cunningly contrived devices, such as a mysterious castle which returned your ball if you putted into the wrong entrance. Courses erupted everywhere – on vacant land behind buildings, in shops, halls, suburban backyards and on beachfronts. This was reflected locally and there were several proposals for miniature golf courses in the Waverley area, many along Campbell Parade fronting the beach. All that remains of these proposals are several maps and sketches held in the Local Studies collection.

Ironically the violence of World War II brought employment in the military and a stimulus to the economy – albeit at a terrible cost. However the effects of the Great Depression were everlasting on a generation of Australians.

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