

Bondi Beach's lagoons



Lagoons behind Bondi Beach late 19th century

Prior to European settlement the land between Bondi Beach and Rose Bay was a series of fresh water lagoons and sand dunes of varying heights.

Some geologists believe that this long low passage at some time allowed the sea access to Port Jackson at Rose Bay from Bondi – making South Head and the land around it an island.

Bondi's fresh water lagoons were mainly seasonal and appearing and disappearing quickly depending on the rainfall. However there were also large permanent lagoons whose banks were lined with Ti-Trees (*leptospermum laevigatum*) and Swamp Oaks (*casuarina glauca*).

The first written reference to these Bondi lagoons is on a map dated 1868, however, they would have been well known much earlier than this to the local Indigenous inhabitants as a good supply of fresh water and food.

The trees on their banks, with huge root systems reaching deep down into the sandy soil, turned the water rust brown and provided nutrients and shelter for fish and insects. Larger animals such as goannas, possums and wallabies would have drunk from this fresh water source.

A 1889 Water Board map shows specific locations for the lagoons:

- ❖ Near the corner of the present day Lamrock and Jaques Avenue
- ❖ Between Simpson Street and Hall Street across Wellington Street
- ❖ Between Warners Avenue, Blair Street and Beach Road
- ❖ Near Old South Head Road and Warners Avenue
- ❖ Between Hastings Parade and Wairoa Avenue

Artist Julian Ashton lived in the Waverley area and in his memoir, *Now Came Still Evening On*, he recalls the Bondi lagoons:

'Bondi when I came to live here was a great mass of sand hills with deep little pockets between filled with black water in which grew monster tea-trees.

'They towered above, making a sort of shadow land, a delightful resting place from which one could look out upon the sun-scorched sand. I have often seen wild duck in these pools. One could walk across the hills and valleys or along the beaches for hours and not meet a soul.'

The lagoons are now long gone, the wild ducks have flown away and the 15 metre Ti-Trees cut down. Sewer labourers began draining two large lagoons in North Bondi in the early 1880s when a trench was built through to Rose Bay. Later other ponds were drained to allow roads to be built, for land to be subdivided and for house construction.

Local historian John Ruffels suggests all is not lost though: 'These days, in the area up from the old lagoon around Forest Knoll Avenue, on a still summer day, the dappled shade from the Banksia trees and Swamp Oak trees continues to remind us of what it must have been like in the bush by the Bondi lagoon all those many years ago.'

Bondi lagoon's tragic legacy

In the 1840s an estate known as the Bondi Estate covered a vast area of the present day Bondi Beach, Bondi Park and the streets from the beach back to O'Brien Street.

Francis O'Brien (1816-1896) was the owner of the Bondi Estate during a significant time in its history. He married three times and had thirteen children, many of them growing up at the Estate's family house 'The Homestead'. 'The Homestead' itself had extensive flower and vegetable gardens and as a thriving farm it employed a number of local men.

The Bondi estate sounds idyllic. The land around 'The Homestead' had paperbark trees, swamp oaks and large-leafed ti-trees, some over 30 feet high, their dense foliage providing welcome shade from the summer heat.

The property's many fresh water lagoons were covered with water lilies, their beautiful flowers floating on the water's surface. A lagoon covering almost two acres was located near 'The Homestead' and it was described as lying 'like a great mirror [reflecting] the trees and banks, and in places it was covered with water lilies.'

Francis O'Brien's youngest children often played at the lagoon near their home, one particular game involved using a big wooden box as a make believe boat.

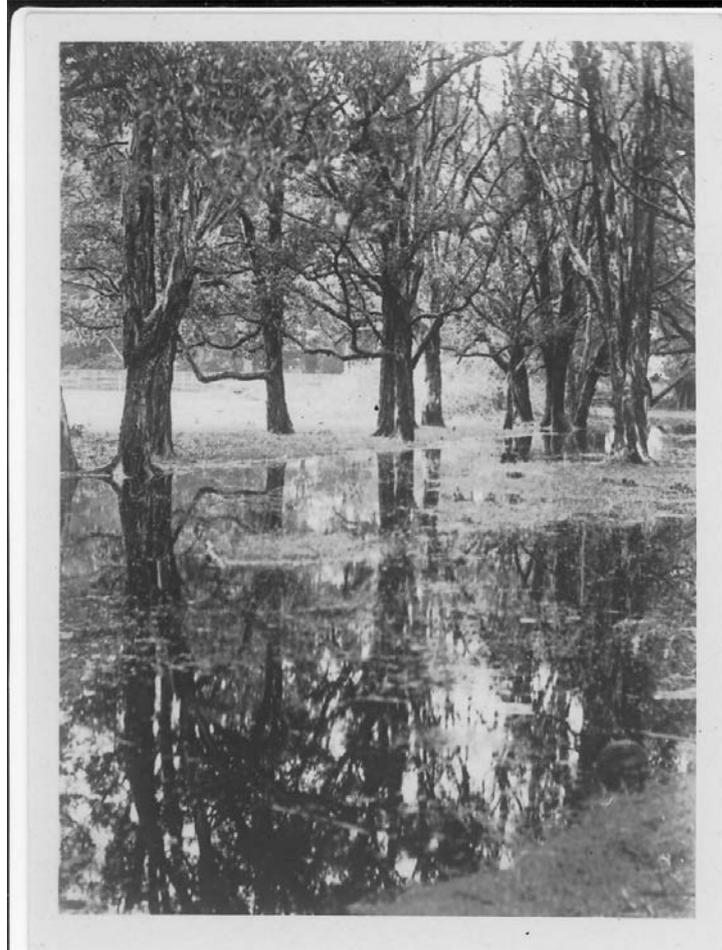
On Saturday 18 April 1896 Francis O'Brien's third wife, Amelia, and mother to his six youngest children, had invited her brother to dine at 'The Homestead'. Did the children become bored with the adult dinner party? With the light almost gone from the April autumn sky, Dorothy and Amy slipped away from the house and headed to the lagoon to continue their adventures with their 'boat'.

Back at 'The Homestead' their elder brother, 15 year old Kirk, heard his young sisters screaming. He and his uncle ran to the lagoon where they saw the box 'boat' floating on top of the water, but ominously there was no sign of the girls. A frantic search of the lagoon ensued and sadly their bodies were soon found. Efforts were made to resuscitate the girls and a police officer and two doctors were summoned, but it was too late. Eleven year old Dorothy and 8 year old Amy had drowned.

Their elderly father, aged 80 at the time of their deaths, died four months later from a heart attack. The O'Brien family believe shock from the sudden loss of his two young daughters hastened his own end.

Rowing across Bondi's lagoons: a first hand account

In 1924 a Waverley historian, Major William L. Johnston, wrote about his boyhood rowing and swimming in the Bondi lagoons for local newspaper the *Eastern Suburbs Daily*. His memories give a fascinating first-hand account of these large lakes of fresh water which lay behind Bondi Beach:



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'[there was]...a lagoon situated between Lamrock Avenue and Hall Street...The strong southerly gales had blown the sand of the beach inland and the surface drainage was blocked, consequently the water backed up and formed a lagoon.

'I remember this lagoon well, by reason of the ti-trees which, growing there in dry ground originally, as the water banked up, throwing out roots at least five feet from the group.

'When Hall Street became more frequented by traffic, and Lamrock Avenue and other streets were formed, the lagoon was drained and filled in and the site is now closely built over.

'In my younger days Bondi was plentifully supplied with water in the form of lagoons which extended from the north of the sand dunes to well over to the Old South Head Road. I remember

the largest of them, near Barracluff Park, adjoining the Biggs' dairy or farm. They dried up somewhat in the summer, but in the winter, and after heavy rain, the country round would be covered – the lagoons linking up with one another and forming one large sheet of water.

'I have rowed a canvas dingy ...over the present Murriverie Road and adjacent streets. We struck a submerged stump one day whilst cruising about, and the craft foundered. It was retrieved when the lagoon dried up...

'Another lagoon was situated to the left of the sewer line, one edge of the water lapping the edge of the ever-encroaching sand hill, the other shore lost among the trunks of the big [50 feet] ti-trees and undergrowth. 'This was the favourite swimming place, the radiation of the sun's rays from the sand warming the water to a pleasing temperature. This lagoon was the first to dry up and disappear, the sewer track draining it and the sand gradually smothering the site.'