

Robertson Park



Postcard of Watsons Bay, early 20th century. Robertson Park is in the centre behind the wharf, with Dunbar House just to the right of the trees.

Robertson Park has associations with the earliest days of the colony. Its proximity to ferry wharves, tram services and its picturesque setting has ensured its continued popularity with tourists.

The Aboriginal group who lived around Watsons Bay and South Head is believed to have been the Birrabirragal people. Physical evidence of their occupation remains in the form of shell middens and rock art around the harbour's edge.

Two years after Europeans first arrived at Sydney Cove, a Lookout Post was established in January 1790 at South Head. Although there are no physical remains of the houses and gardens built for the signalmen assigned to the post, it is thought that they were located in the grounds of present day Robertson Park. At this time the major creek in Watsons Bay (The Glen) ran through Robertson Park forming a reed swamp at its western end.

Clovelly

In July 1834 Thomas Watson, master mariner and pilot at Watsons Bay since 1822, was granted 2 acres, 2 roods on part of what was later to become the Clovelly Estate and then Robertson Park. Watson built a house on the site described in an advertisement in the Sydney Gazette in 1835 as 'a beautifully chaste and neat marine villa'. Hannibal Hawkins Macarthur, nephew of John Macarthur, had been leasing the villa since 1838, and he purchased it in 1840 naming it *Clovelly*. Elizabeth Macarthur spent a number of summers holidaying at *Clovelly*.

Henry Watson Parker later purchased the property in 1848. Parker expanded the grounds of the property where he 'established a garden of exotic trees and shrubs of which some Moreton Bay Figs and Norfolk Island Pines remain'. A panorama of *Clovelly* and Watsons Bay from the Holtermann Collection, c1875, reveals a heavily wooded garden in the grounds of *Clovelly*.

Edward Flood, local businessman and builder, became the next owner when he purchased *Clovelly* in 1862. He too extended the size of the property. He later entered political life, becoming a member of the Legislative Council in 1843 and a member of the Legislative Assembly from 1856 to 1860.

Sir John Robertson, five times Premier of NSW, and his wife Lady Margaret Emma Robertson, lived at *Clovelly* from 1864. They purchased the property in 1878 and proceeded to make changes to the house. Robertson died at *Clovelly* in 1891. The house remained in private ownership and was allowed to deteriorate until it was declared unfit for human habitation in July 1902. The house was demolished in 1903.

The archaeological survey of Robertson Park identified what appeared to be some physical remains of *Clovelly* house and outbuildings in the northeastern corner of the park.

Establishment of a park

After Robertson's death the grounds of *Clovelly* became a popular place for picnics. Calls to have the land resumed for a public park led to the establishment of a committee of the whole of Vacluse Council in 1899. Representations were made to the Government who finally agreed to the proposal and the land was handed over to the public in 1906. This land included a parcel of land on the corner of Clovelly and Military Roads owned by Joseph Richard Siddins. The site, which housed a stone cottage, had been used as a dairy. It was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in May 1906, that in 1902 a narrow strip along the waterfront had been resumed which allowed the proposed park to run to the water. Reports of the time praised the suitability of the land as a park, referring to the 'level piece of ground', 'well-grassed land' and 'fine trees...especially Norfolk Island pines and Moreton Bay figs'.

Vacluse Council was appointed as trustee and the newly formed park was named Clovelly Park. In 1909 it was renamed Robertson Park in honour of Sir John Robertson. In 1910 the *Tourists guide to Watsons Bay and Vacluse* described Robertson Park as 'a fine recreation ground, with numerous seats under shady pine and Moreton Bay fig trees' and 'affording an agreeable resting place for visitors'.

The formation of the park coincided with improved public transport to Watsons Bay. In 1903 the tram ran as far as the Signal Station and in 1909 it was extended to a new terminus in Military Road at the foot of The Gap and at the head of Robertson Park. The ferry wharf, built at the bottom of Military Road in 1881, was replaced with a new wharf in 1910.

Picnickers and tourists travelling to Robertson Park were well serviced by nearby tearooms and hotels, as well as the attraction of the Watsons Bay Baths recently built in 1905.

The Council in 1912 made another resumption of land to the southwest adjacent to Clovelly Road, which further enlarged the park. This resumption appears to have contained the house known as *Zenleith* built in the 1850s by a harbour pilot, George Bainbridge.

Zenleith was later purchased by another pilot, Robert Cork, who resided there for many years. The house was demolished to make way for the extension of the park in 1914.

Dunbar House

Dunbar House was built as a marine villa in the late 1830s on land owned by Richard Siddins. Siddins had received a grant of 3 acres, 2 roods and 4 perches in 1834. In 1836 after the house was damaged by fire, Siddins sold the house to the Colonial Architect Mortimer Lewis. Lewis then transferred the property to Pieter Laurentz Campbell in 1839. Campbell then proceeded to enlarge and improve his property, naming the estate *Zandvliet*. Campbell subdivided the property in 1841 and following the auction Thomas Woolley purchased several lots including the house.

After the house was sold again, it was offered for lease in 1854 as the *Marine Hotel*. The first licensee, Charles Smith, attracted visitors to the hotel by offering such features as a restaurant, well-stocked cellar and a band, which played on Saturday afternoons. The next licensee Henry Billings, renamed the hotel the *Greenwich Pier Hotel* in about 1859. Billings added a ballroom and private zoo to the list of attractions. In 1878 the hotel was again renamed, this time the *Royal Hotel*.

Vaucluse Council acquired the building in 1924 for use as its Council Chambers with the official opening taking place on 13th November 1924. The building served as Council chambers until 1948 when Vaucluse Council was reunited with Woollahra Council. It appears to have been named *Dunbar House* in 1950 after a decision taken by Woollahra Council to name it in honour of the ship *Dunbar*. The building remains the property of Woollahra Council and houses a restaurant and the Watsons Bay Library.

Development of the Park

After assuming control of Robertson Park, Vaucluse Council undertook to construct a number of structures on the site including a rotunda, a series of toilet blocks, children's playground and shelters.

Vaucluse Council was persuaded to build a bandstand or rotunda in the park in 1914 after receiving a request from the Eastern Suburbs United Band that Council erect a 'platform' for use as a bandstand. The resulting octagonal shaped bandstand was built of wood on a concrete foundation with a wood shingled roof. The bandstand was ready for use by November 1914 when the Eastern Suburbs United Band approached Council for permission to 'discourse programmes of music in Clovelly Park on Sunday evenings from 8pm to 9.30pm during the summer months, and...to rope off an area adjacent to the bandstand...in which to provide temporary seating accommodation at the charge of a silver coin for admission...'.

Vaucluse Council planned a beautification scheme for Watsons Bay beach in 1923. The first stage of the scheme as reported in a newspaper article of the time, was prepared by George C Thomas, and included a wide esplanade from the ferry wharf to Gibsons Beach, an ornamental entrance to Robertson Park, a wall along the front of the park fronting the harbour and the placement of ornamental lamp standards on top of a raised sea wall.

A German gun, referred to at the time as a 'war trophy', was placed in Robertson Park by Vacluse Council after World War I. It was reported that it took 25 horses to take the gun to Watsons Bay. It was removed for scrap metal in 1941. According to the 1991 archaeological report, Robertson Park was used as a lookout base during WWII. Trenches were dug on the western side of the park for protection during attack.

Newspaper cuttings from the 1940s reveal that Council organised a series of 'children's days' in Robertson Park. The first, to celebrate peace following the end of World War II, was held on 2nd March 1946 and included a fancy dress parade, treasure hunt, and athletic and sailing events. Jubilee celebrations for King George V were held in the park on May 6th 1935 with events for children and a fireworks display.

There have been a number of monuments, memorials and associated tree plantings placed in the park. The Memorial to Robert Watson was designed by Leslie Wilkinson and unveiled in the park in 1929. Another monument, the Milestone obelisk, which commemorated the building of the South Head Road in 1811, was probably erected in the 1830s. A number of plaques and tree plantings took place in 1960 to mark the Centenary of the Municipality of Woollahra, 1960. Plaques in memory of Pixie O'Harris, and Christina Stead were unveiled in 1993.

**Prepared by Woollahra Local History Centre
June 2005**