

Gap Park, Watsons Bay



Postcard of The Gap and South Head c1908, with Gap Park in the foreground.

The area of Gap Park, bordered by the Gap and dramatic sea views, has been a popular destination for tourists since the early 19th century. The park itself was dedicated as a public recreation reserve on 28th June 1887. The extension of the tramline to the Signal Station at Watsons Bay in 1903 with further extensions in 1909 to Gap Park, (including a new terminus in Military Road below the Gap) ensured the park's increased accessibility for sightseers.

The extension of the tramline and continued popularity of the Gap also assisted the growth of the nearby commercial centre of Watsons Bay in Military Road. In 1909 the old Gap Tavern was demolished and replaced by a new Town Hall for Vaucluse Council. The Rivoli Picture Theatre operated from the upper floor of the Town Hall from 1910. Refreshment rooms such as the Gap Café, the Park Tearooms and the Dunbar Tearooms all opened near the new terminus.

Tourist ventures in Gap Park

During the early years of the park, enterprising locals set up various tourist attractions there. A popular device in use in the 19th century at places of scenic beauty was the 'camera obscura'. The camera obscura was a dark room (or a box) with a hole in one wall through which the outside image was reflected. At about the turn of the 19th century Caesar Anthony Colonna engaged the firm Lassetter & Co. to erect a camera obscura housed in an octagonal red wood building, at Gap Park. Mr Colonna, who lived at Watsons Bay from 1895 to about 1904, had a set price for admission. In 1901 Vaucluse Council, under instruction from the Military Authorities who believed the building 'might afford an opportunity for foreign spies to study the fortifications at South Head', ordered Capt. Colonna to remove the building. It was later decided to remove the lens and instruments and lock up the building. Finally in June 1914 the Camera Obscura building was 'forcibly removed' by the Military Authorities.

Telescopes for hire were lodged at the park in the 1930s as another tourist venture. In 1933 Mr H. E. Cooper was granted permission by Vaucluse Council to exhibit a binocular telescope near the Gap and at other points near the Lighthouse. Mr Cooper 'proposed making a small charge for the service'. Permission was also granted to Mr W. V. Merryweather to use a telescope near the Gap in 1935. He also planned to charge for its use.

Monuments and memorials

The park has been chosen as the site for two important memorials, the Grieve Memorial and the Dunbar Memorial. The Grieve Memorial was unveiled in the southern end of Gap Park on Saturday afternoon of the 22nd December 1900, in memory of Lieutenant Gideon James Grieve who was killed at the battle of Paardeberg, South Africa on 18th February 1900. The sandstone memorial originally took the form of a drinking fountain with the statue of a highlander on top. Lt. Grieve and his family were residents of Watsons Bay.

The anchor from the ship “Dunbar”, wrecked off South Head on the night of the 20th August 1857, was recovered from the sea at Jacob’s Ladder in 1910. Vaucluse Council placed it and other relics in a museum behind the old Town Hall in Military Road. In 1930 Ald. Coombes arranged for the anchor to be moved to the cliffs just south of the Gap and the memorial was unveiled in August 1930.

The gun emplacement at Gap Park for a small calibre gun, which was never installed, dates from World War II.

Development of Gap Park

One of the earliest works carried out at the park by Vaucluse Council was the implementation of a system of pathways. A report from 1920 describes the paths as made of asphalt. At one point the tram line crossed one of the paths and it was here that an electric light was ‘lit every night till about 12.15’ which was the responsibility of ‘the conductor on the last tram from Watsons Bay to switch off.’

In 1908 there were 2 wooden summer houses and a tenanted wooden cottage in the park. which Council leased to Mrs Nott. This cottage was demolished in about 1930.

In 1934 the landscape architect Mr A. L. Doust was asked to draw up plans for proposed improvements to Gap Park. The proposed works included plans to:

- 1. To renew all defective timber in the fence along the edge of the cliff and to paint same in white.*
- 2. To demolish two existing summerhouses in Gap Park and construct three new ones in brick similar to those in Robertson Park.*
- 3. The whole of the lantana and other scrub, excepting natural trees and shrubs, to be removed and a general scheme of beautification of the Park in the form of rock pockets and the planting of additional trees and shrubs and installation of water services for same.*
- 4. Provide additional park seats for use by the public and renovate all existing seats and new ones with three coats of paint.*
- 5. The existing gents lavatories at the Gap are to be demolished.*
- 6. The horse drinking trough at the Gap is to be repaired and a new water service provided to same.*

A proposal made in 1960 to establish the *Wentworth Women’s Bowling Club* at Gap Park was rejected by the Minister for Lands in December 1961. This proposal caused some controversy in the area and the Committee for the Preservation of Gap Park was formed in

1961. Council, as a result of the defeat of the proposal, resolved to investigate a long term plan for the improvement of the park.

After the trams ceased operations to Watsons Bay in 1960 the tracks were removed and in 1964 Council filled in the 'old tramway cutting with the object of restoring the area'. The Vacluse Progress Association expressed interest in the park and drew up plans of its own for its restoration. Council in July 1965 moved to carry out further improvements and restoration work in the park. It was later reported by Council's Engineer that the area of Gap Park had been 'restored in 1965 to something like the original contours, with great care being taken at the time to preserve the natural rock surfaces and the few remaining specimens of tea tree (*Leptospermum laevigatum*)'.

In 1966 the Trees and Gardens Committee of Council proposed that 'a special area be set aside for the planting of native shrubs and plants...' It was reported in October that extensive work had been carried out 'including stone revetments, regrading and topdressing, relocation of shelter shed, construction of concrete kerb and gutter and concrete footpath.'

Miss Thistle Stead, one of the original members of the Committee for the Preservation of Gap Park, was invited by Council to prepare a schematic plan of improvements for Gap Park. Part of the plan was adopted by Council in October 1972.

A bush regeneration program was begun at Gap Park in the 1980s and Woollahra Council continues to manage the Bushcare program at Gap Park in order to protect and maintain the bushland at the park.

**Prepared by Woollahra Local History Centre
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