

Parsley Bay Reserve



Parsley Bay is a narrow inlet of Sydney Harbour, the surrounding land enhanced with caves and rock overhangs, a small watercourse and dense native vegetation. The foreshores of this tiny but beautiful bay have long been one of Sydney's favourite harbour-side places, and since 1906 have been officially reserved for the enjoyment of the public.

History of the site and its surrounds

The traditional owners of this land were members of the Birrabirragal band, a coastal group which clustered around the periphery of Sydney harbour, their culture, way-of-life and economy attuned to the natural characteristics of their foreshore environment. The former presence of this people is evidenced today by rock art sites and shell middens in the South Head and Vacluse areas.

European occupation officially began in 1792. In that year, a grant of a land was given to Thomas Laycock, Deputy Commissary-General and a Quartermaster in the New South Wales Corps. The grant was described as 'eighty acres of land ... at the head of Parsley Bay' – the earliest known use of this name, the origin of which uncertain.

Laycock called his property *Woodmancote*. The land, gradually consolidated with neighbouring parcels, passed through the hands of a succession of subsequent owners, including Sir Henry Brown Hayes and Captain John Piper, before its acquisition by the Wentworth family in 1827. The foreshores of Parsley Bay, as one small part of the Wentworth family's 105 acre Vacluse Estate, were to remain in private ownership for a further eighty years.

There is considerable evidence, however, that Parsley Bay was a popular setting for picnics and camping before the establishment of the reserve that validated public access.

The 'Foreshores Vigilance' movement and the Parsley Bay Reserve

Foreshore land at Parsley Bay came into public ownership largely as a result of the efforts of William Notting and his *Harbour Foreshores Vigilance Committee* which lobbied the State Government from 1905 to secure access to areas of the waterfront for the people of Sydney. Notting, a keen yachtsman, began his campaign to liberate the

foreshores in the late 19th century, and from 1900 was joined by a growing throng of supporters, who boosted his voice in the cause. Like Notting, his fellow activists could foresee the impact of Sydney's residential growth upon the harbour, as the large, open estates of the few were gradually replaced by dense settlement, and the 'pond' in a privately owned 'paddock' became fully enclosed by suburban development.

Notting is perhaps more closely associated with Nielsen Park than Parsley Bay, since that is where a memorial to his efforts stands. However, the resumption of the Parsley Bay foreshore in 1906 was the first of a number secured by the movement he founded, and as such deserves a special place in the history of foreshore protection.

The role of Vacluse Council

Following the dedication of the Parsley Bay foreshores in December 1907, Vacluse Council accepted responsibility for the care and management of the Reserve in 1908, and in 1916 was formally appointed the Trustee of the land. The Council of Vacluse was thus responsible for all the early improvements to the Reserve, funded entirely from Council coffers in the face of the recurrent failure of their appeals for Government funding.

When Vacluse was united with the neighbouring Municipality of Woollahra in 1948, the Reserve came under the control of Woollahra Council.

The bridge across 'Parsley Glen'

As early as 1906, Vacluse Council was considering the benefits of installing a footbridge across 'The Parsley Glen' to improve pedestrian access between the two shores of the Bay. A cable suspension bridge was constructed during 1910 at a cost of £500.

The work was carried out using Council labour and the bridge built to the design of Edwin Sautelle, then Town Clerk and Engineer of Vacluse. Sautelle was later an Alderman of the Council, serving as Mayor twice. His greatest legacy to Vacluse, however, is found in the graceful lines of the Parsley Bay Bridge - the distinguishing feature of the Bay and a focal point of the Reserve.

The Kiosks

In 1910, Vacluse Council approached Mr Varney Parkes, architect of the Vacluse Town Hall (then under construction) to design a kiosk for the Parsley Bay Reserve. The son of the 'Founder of Federation', Sir Henry Parkes, Varney Parkes was responsible for a number of architectural landmarks of Sydney, including the Marble Bar of Adam's Hotel, which survives, under official Heritage protection, today. A less celebrated refreshment place was the small kiosk building he designed for the Parsley Bay Reserve - a shingled timber structure built at the head of the Bay, beside the creek, in a style reminiscent of a Japanese Tearoom, built at a cost of £300.

By the mid 1920s the original kiosk had fallen into a sorry state of disrepair and was replaced by the present structure in early 1929, built on a new site, on the southern edge of the beach front. An imposing building - more pavilion than kiosk in style and scale, and incorporating a residence for the proprietor - the new kiosk was designed by Alderman Carfrae of the Vacluse Council, who acted as honorary architect. The building work was carried out by Mr. H V Horwood, at a cost of £2, 195.

A succession of lessees operated from the first kiosk, culminating in the proprietorship of Robert Morgan, beginning in 1923. Morgan was to have a major impact on the Reserve, making many improvements of his own, and pressuring Council to carry out more. Under his management, the Reserve, and the Kiosk building, became a focus of community life –

especially for the young - a tradition carried on years later by his successor, Larry Daley, who took over the lease in 1946, and came to be known as 'The Pied Piper of Parsley Bay'.

Swimming

Parsley Bay was a popular bathing spot with the small local population of the immediate area long before the provision of a shark proof structure was considered necessary or desirable. However, as the surrounding area developed into a suburb with the break up of the Vacluse Estate, and as the district became more accessible to tourists with better public transport, there was call from public and local councillors alike for better facilities for bathers. As early as 1914, Vacluse Council was considering shark-proofing the Bay, and in the 1920s a proposal to stretch torpedo nets across the mouth of the Bay gained temporary, though insufficient, support. The need for changing facilities for bathers was also a matter for concern, and modesty perhaps being a more pressing issue than safety, dressing sheds were supplied in the 1920s – almost a decade before a swimming enclosure was achieved.

In 1930 the Vacluse Progress Association again raised the issue of bathing facilities through a public meeting, and Council resolved to seek State Government support for the project. In September 1930, Vacluse Council accepted a tender from the firm of Messrs Buzacott to supply and install mesh netting at the head of the Bay at a cost of 259 pounds, 16 shillings and threepence. This work was completed in February 1931 and the Bay was finally secure from sharks.

In 1982, Woollahra Council installed a new, visually unobtrusive floating net, and upgraded the dressing facilities later that decade.

The sheltered waters of the Bay remain a popular swimming place.

Later history of the Reserve

While custodian of the Reserve, Vacluse Council continued to upgrade the 'pleasure grounds' and facilities of Parsley Bay. The further work of dredging the Bay was carried out during 1934. Over time, part of the natural watercourse was contained within a series of man-made channels and pipes, the beachfront was reclaimed, and a sea wall built. A large area of turf created a convenient place for picnics and games.

These changes set the scene for the post World War II period, during which the Reserve was to become the setting for large-scale picnics organised by Clubs, Trade Unions and other groups. An active life saving group was formed and a St John's ambulance post operated from the kiosk.

While such gatherings are less common today, the Reserve remains a popular place for more intimate picnic parties, and, since the 1970s, for weddings. It has also formed the backdrop for a number of films, commercials and television programs in recent decades.

Woollahra Council has continued to maintain the Reserve and beachfront and in recent years has pioneered a bush regeneration program in the gully area, allowing the native species to prevail following the eradication of exotics.

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