

the peninsula Observer

newsletter of the Balmain Association

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The little hut

by Ray Stevens



Part of the Holtermann Panorama of Sydney Harbour showing the hut behind Captain McLean's House

The earliest dwellings in

Balmain and Birchgrove history is written largely by people that write history, but we should not confuse history with fact.

In this regard the common documented history of the first house on the Balmain Peninsula is Birch Grove House c. 1810 built by John Birch on land previously known as Whitfield's Farm and later extended in 1827 by Rowland Walpole Loane.

According to the conditions of Private George Whitfield's lease of the land he was 'required to live on the land and "proceed to the Improvement and Cultivation thereto"' (LHJ 15, p.7).

This immediately raises the question, did George Whitfield build a dwelling prior to Birch Grove House? One could ask equally logically where did the labour come from to build Birch Grove House either in its original form in 1810 or later with grand extensions and expansion by Loane in 1827?

It is untenable to consider that the convict based labour and tradesmen travelled from Sydney Town each day for work on the site. Temporary accommodation in canvas tents may have been a possibility, but for the foreman of the works a more permanent dwelling of some sort, possibly

Whitfield's house or hut, is a possibility. Solling & Reynolds write that 'Birch Grove House, the first residence to appear on the Balmain peninsula, offered seclusion and views.... The men's huts, located a discreet distance from the residence, housed the convicts who laboured on the estate (*Leichhardt: On the Margins of the City*, p.15). Waterview House built most likely also by Loane, sometime prior to 1833 presents a similar contradiction.

**The little hut
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Heritage Festival: Connecting the Precinct

Free event

11.30am to 3pm:
Saturday 20 April
Tuesday 23 April
Saturday 27 April
Tuesday 30 April
Saturday 4 May
Tuesday 7 May

Do you ever wonder what happened to the Town Hall cupola?

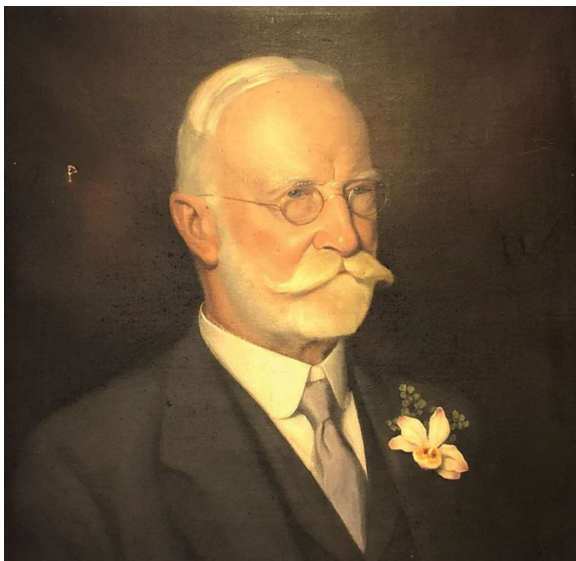
Mark Calabretta takes us on a historical mystery tour of how the Town Hall lost its 'head'.

An amazing piece of historical research that will excite historians and the casual on lookers alike.

What makes the Court House and Town Hall of interest is the work being planned by the Inner West Council to revamp the area between these two buildings making a precinct that all the Balmain locals will be proud of.



Deloitte's Orchid House



Built around the same time as the Balmain Precinct c1890, connections had been forged with members of St Mary's Church, Balmain – the orchid collectors Captain Broomfield, Mr Fitzgerald II, who also paid pew rent at the Church. Today, this beautiful 19th century structure survives, restored and cherished by its owners.

The Balmain Association Inc. representing Balmain, Birchgrove and Rozelle

Since 1965 we have aimed to:

- Improve the living, working and recreational amenities of our area
- maintain all features having natural, architectural and or historical value of the area and keep a permanent collection of historical interest
- seek the cooperation of everyone concerned in the realisation of the above.

Members are welcome to attend the Balmain Association meetings at 6pm on the first Wednesday of each month at the Watch House, 179 Darling Street Balmain.

The History Room at the Watch House is open every Saturday from 11:30am to 3pm and every Tuesday from 11am to 1pm.

Website: www.balmainassociation.org.au

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President's Report

2023 has been another good year for the Association. The committee has been strengthened by new members and at the same time some stalwarts have 'retired'.

Long serving member June Lunsman was editor of *The Peninsula Observer* for many years and has continued to handle artists bookings. June handed the journal over to Fiona Rivers in 2020 and has given notice on the bookings role. Robin Longhurst has deputised for June several times and will assist in the role in 2024.

The BA joined with the Balmain Institute to host Elizabeth Farrelly's interesting and thought-provoking talk about beauty in architecture and the world around us.

The BA successfully convinced IWC Council that the Tobacco Store had altered a heritage shopfront in Balmain without the necessary DA. We wait to see the outcome.

There have been many successful artist's exhibitions through the year and the Association itself has held two of its own.

Mark Callabretta's postcard collection forms the basis of the present exhibition Greetings from Balmain. Mark has proven a great contributor to Balmain's historical record with articles on our website covering the Town Hall's cupola, and a Ginger Megg's film shot in Balmain.

Helen Carter's second book, *Balmain Peninsula – Industrial Vandalism* was published and is proving as successful as her previous book.

Fiona Rivers continued to edit *The Peninsula Observer* and has published several interesting articles.

An Arts and Culture subcommittee was formed to focus on running these aspects of the association's work. It is chaired by Lisa Tatman and will prepare a plan to focus on these areas in 2024. Lisa and Michael Bounds

represented the BA on the IWC's Town Hall precinct work group.

The Watch House's maintenance requires constant vigil. Not just keeping the gutters clean there is also need to repair and replace items. The Charge room's floor was in poor condition and has been replaced with a much-improved wooden floor. Recently approved are repairs to the woodwork, mainly in the exercise yard and toilets. Painting will be required soon. John Symons, David Somerfield and Michael Bounds are taking care of this ongoing work.

Wayne Longbottom has installed CCTV to increase the security of the often empty building. Wayne also looked after our computers and digital storage.

The archives and history team have responded to many queries and also increased our digital presence. Helen Carter, Ross MacKenzie and Wayne have been there almost every Tuesday through the year. Volunteer Elisabeth Thilo has scanned our collection of local newspaper *The Link* to ensure its access for research.

The Association's finances have been well cared for by Carolyn Allan while Di Garder has documented our meetings. Ross has deputised as chair as I was unable to attend some meetings due to travel and grandparenting.

Finally, I have decided not to stand as Association President for 2024. I am of the belief that roles like this need a change of incumbent after a few years. Subject to election I will remain on the committee to assist in the BA's future.

Duncan MacAuslan
President 2023

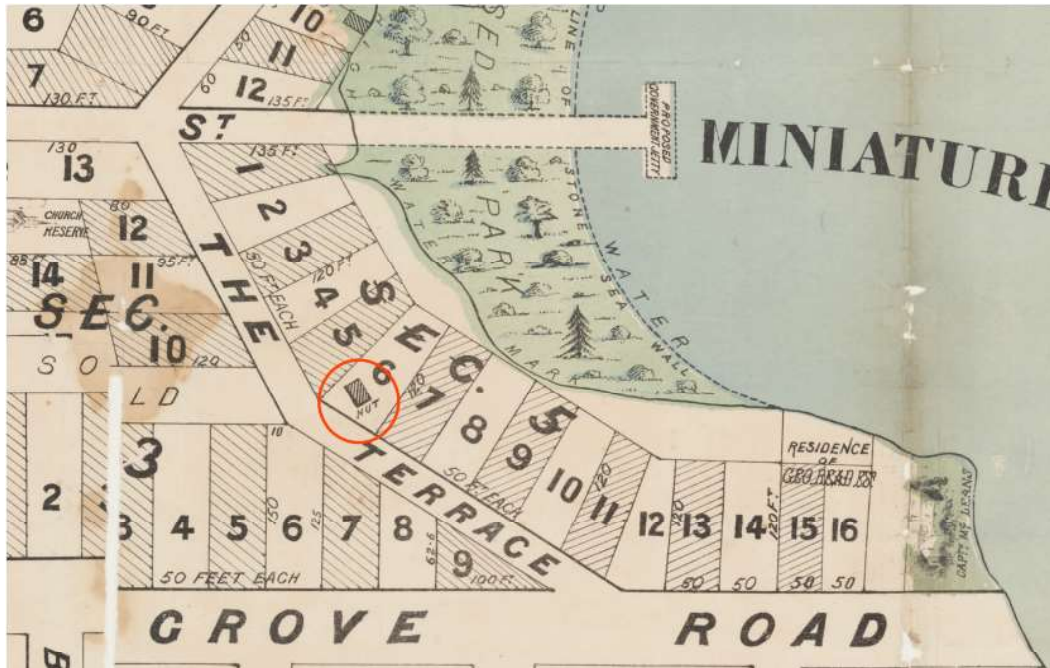
**The little hut
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While the land that encompassed Balmain's land grant was known earlier as Gilchrist's Place, prior to that it was known as Ross's Farm

An early advertisement in 1842 by the notable real estate agent of the time, Mr Stubbs, for 'twenty four well cultivated acres' of land between Birch Grove and Waterview House upon which was located 'A cottage and two huts'

Naples' around 1878 based on an earlier plan by Joubert, prepared by W. M. Brownrigg,

A government park was proposed as part of Ferdinand Reuss Jnr's early subdivision but it was not until 1881 that the park land



Part of Ferdinand Reuss Jnr's plan for the 'Miniature Bay of Naples' showing the hut on lot 6 of The Terrace

and even Balmain's Farm (*The Australian*, June 7, 1826, p.4).

The Ross's Farm was that of Major Robert Ross of the Marines, (later to be Lieutenant Governor of Norfolk Island). It is hard to imagine a 'farm' did not have some sort of early dwelling located somewhere on the peninsula. Clearly we are dealing with the Eurocentric historical view that a simple dwelling, a hut or shack is not a 'house'. This does not even broach the topic of indigenous gunyah or goondie of the Wangal people which no doubt dotted the foreshores prior to settlement. Finding documentation on these early dwellings is not easy, even when there are passing references and logical conclusions to be made. One possible example that seems to have been glossed over is the simple hut that was located on the foreshore of Snails Bay.

and which will 'form a remarkable good purchase for immediate occupation?' (*SMH* Wed 19 Jan 1842, p.4). The earliest pictorial reference of one of the possible huts is in the 1860 painting of Long Nose Point and the Birch Grove House grounds by George P. Slade.

The hut is clearly shown in one of the frames of the Holtermann Panorama of Sydney Harbour around 1875 that includes Birchgrove.

It appears as a very crude structure with a full width front verandah facing the bay, a bark roof and side projecting fireplace. It is shown with somewhat less clarity in another photograph taken from Berry's Bay. The hut is also included on Ferdinand Reuss Jnr's plan for the subdivision of the Birch Grove Estate, pompously called the 'Miniature Bay of

was formally acquired. The hut located just at the bend in The Terrace, on lot 6 of Section 5, was demolished around that time and with the reclaiming of the mud flats the Birchgrove Recreation Ground was created. The park was completed in 1885 (Conservation Management Plan for Birchgrove Park, p.11). Further research: The age of the hut is not known but the style of construction is consistent with very early crude structures with some building techniques like bark roofing learned by observing indigenous shelters. (If anyone questions this I would suggest referring to Paul Memmott: *Gunyah Goondie + Wurley, The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia*).

The site location can be inferred from Ferdinand Reuss Jnr's plan and should be considered a site that holds archeological potential.

Vale

Rita Ellis

by Carolyn Allen

It is with sadness that we mark the death of Rita Ellis.

After joining the Association in 1992 with husband Bob, Rita was a member of the Management Committee for 17 years.

This included serving as Vice-President (2002-3) and many years on the History Committee.

Rita was awarded Life Membership in 2017 after resigning from the committee in 2013.



Although I only knew Rita in her later years, I remember her as one who was small of stature but with an enormous abundance of energy, enthusiasm and smiles.

Rita was one of those people, without whom, no community organisation would survive. Always at the centre of the work, if not in the spotlight.

It was not until Rita resigned that she stopped filling the role of the person who put the rubbish bins out. I am told that she needed to drag a milk crate to the rear gate to reach out to open it! She continued her role as the organiser of our fire safety equipment until about 2019!.

In her role on the History Committee she was very active in setting up exhibitions and conducting tours. Members who knew her said that she loved the school and vacation care tours and visits!

Our sincere condolences to Bob and all her family.



We are not NIMBYs!

The main topic concerning local councils at present seems to be the NSW Government's proposed rezoning rules around railway and metro stations. In this regard Balmain has contributed more than its fair share of medium density housing over the years. This includes: the Balmain Power station, now Balmain Shores; the old Balmain Coal Mine, now Hopetoun Quays; the Lever Bros works, now Somerset Mews; the Colgate Palmolive building converted to units; the Monsanto site, now Balmain Cove; Mort's Dock, now public and private housing and White Bay Power station.

Putting Balmain into the wider

context of the Inner West Council area we have 2,418 dwellings per square kilometre - the fourth highest dwelling density of all 130 NSW Councils.

By way of comparison that is twice the density of Canterbury-Bankstown Council (1,210), almost twice that of Parramatta Council (1,272) and 2000 more dwellings per square kilometre than the Northern Beaches Council.

Over the last 10 years, the Inner West Council area has seen growth of 248 dwellings for every square kilometre. This increase in density, alone, is almost the same as the actual dwelling density of Liverpool (255), Campbelltown (203) and Penrith (201) Councils.

The Inner West also has the second lowest ratio of open space (people per hectare) of all NSW Councils. As more dwellings are packed in there is little opportunity, or funding, for the Inner West Council to purchase new open space.

Next time you hear someone refer to the inner west as selfish, self-serving NIMBYs, you might like to ask which Council they are from and point out our very high dwelling density and our very low open space ratio.

by Ross Mackenzie, Balmain Association and John Stamolis, Independent councillor for the Balmain ward

Bruce Mackenzie landscape architect: a retrospective

by Malcolm Garder

Sydney's first new school landscape architect, Bruce Mackenzie, died at the age of 92 last month after a brief illness. Bruce's first Sydney Harbour waterfront park design was Illoura Reserve, the old MSB site on Peacock Point, East Balmain. The site was purchased by the State Planning Authority for public open space in 1970, and the park was to commemorate the Bicentennial of the landing of Captain Cook.

The park design was revolutionary for the time. Bruce rejected traditional designs, as there were no straight lines, no circles, no concrete, no English trees. He retained and utilised the existing sandstone elements, native trees and shrubs, rough stone paths and walls. He incorporated old wharfing timber from the site to form the viewing platform, stairs to the waterfront and the largest swings ever seen in Sydney (unfortunately now removed).

Bruce was commissioned again to extend the park, incorporating the land purchased from Fenwick Tugs to link in with the East Balmain Wharf and Thornton Park.

Bruce was a pioneer helping to establish the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. The new wave of landscape architects were soon known as the "Sydney Bush School," and were known for "respecting the spirit of the place".

Bruce designed four waterfront parks on Sydney Harbour. The second park on the Balmain peninsula was Yurilbin Reserve on Long Nose Point Birchgrove, an old disused shipyard with slipway adjoining the Birchgrove Wharf.

The design again is similar to Illoura Reserve retaining the form of the shipyard, sandstone



Yurilbin Reserve on Long Nose Point



Illoura Reserve on the old Maritime Services Board site on Peacock Point

walls and paths and adding a recycled timber viewing platform.

Other parks on Sydney Harbour were Clark Island and Bicentennial Park at Glebe/Annandale. There were many other landscape designs by Bruce including park furniture, landscaping motorways and Australian Embassies overseas and possibly his greatest achievement was the design of Sydney Olympic Park.

On a personal note Di Garder, your Secretary and I, travelled to China twice with Bruce and his wife Laraine on architectural tours organised by Heritage Architect, Ann Warr. Ann worked in a Shanghai architect's office for some years.

Bruce's wake was held in February at the State Library as Bruce has

donated his body of work to the library. He was still working on a revision of his book and the cataloguing while in palliative care.

Bruce's book was *Design with Landscape* and we will try and get a copy for the Balmain Association.

What's on at the Watch House

Please check the Balmain Association website www.balmainassociation.org.au for up-to-date information on art exhibitions.

Uplift

The Wet Paint Collective, an all-women group of artists exhibiting in Sydney's inner west, lets the sunshine in with their latest show, UPLIFT.

Returning to the Balmain Watch House, artists Juliette Gillies, Jen Hsieh, Claire Engkaninan Low, Alexandra Plim, Cindy Scheule, Kezia Tan and Jackie Yael present new work which aims to elevate viewers' moods. This unmissable show includes figurative work, abstraction, watercolours and more.

The title refers to the desired effect on the viewer and also the central role art plays in each artist's life – it is a source of inspiration, joy and comfort.

March 1, 6pm to 8pm, March 2 and 3, 9am to 4pm.



Making Memories

Merle Van Esch is a 77-year-old self-taught local artist. Merle is exhibiting some of her favourite works in this her debut exhibition. Merle takes inspiration from the natural environment and her works are often a hybrid of local landscape and abstraction.

Saturday and Sunday 9 and 10 March 10am to 4pm.

Unfamiliar Territory

Works on paper explore the notion of the passages we move through in our lives. We are inevitably confronted with the relentlessness of change and our experiences are deeply connected to the time and place in which we find ourselves. The landscapes in these works are ones formed in the mind and represent an internal monologue, a travelling through the past and into the future. My aim is for the viewer to find their own narrative within these worlds. The exhibition consists of drawings, monotypes and ink works.

Saturday and Sunday, March 16 and 17, 10am to 4pm.

Opening Saturday, March 16 at 2pm All welcome.



What's on at the Watch House

Two Pretty Birds

Chloe Cassidy is a local Balmain artist who sells work both nationally and internationally. She has worked in a variety of mediums but is most drawn to watercolour because of its fluid and unpredictable nature. This medium aids her to produce wonderfully whimsical paintings based on her love of nature and the natural world.

Francine Courteille is a Sydney based artist and a graduate of National Art School. Her paintings capture both native and non-native fauna in textural oils. Her most favoured subject matter is influenced by her love of foxes and birds, and she has studied them in a variety of works and mediums

Saturday 30 Sunday 31 March and Monday 31 April 1, 10am to



Over to You - 2024'

Richard returns to the Watch House with a small new exhibition together with ex exhibition stock at reduced prices. He continues to explore landscape and what he calls 'floral lyrics inspired works.' There are as usual a number of styles and media including watercolour, acrylic, mixed media and alcohol ink.

Richard looks forward to welcoming you sometime over the weekend to enjoy the art, a glass of wine or soft drink and light food.

Opening 7.30pm Friday, April 5, preview from 6pm Saturday 6th 10am to 6pm Sunday 7th 10am to 6pm. All welcome.

Alchemy of Nature

Talia Iaconis and Barbara Newton have a love for Australian landscape.

Each artist photographs the landscape during their travels that then becomes a documented journal for the execution of their artworks.

Talia uses her connection with the landscape by the use of natural material (painting on organic timber pieces) . Her artworks sit on a solid iron base elevating the unique landscape for the viewer to capture the sense of space and to evoke a feeling of calmness and tranquillity.

Barbara's intricate trees dance around and display beautiful movement across the canvas. Her exploration of texture and colour draws out an amazing vibrancy reflecting the Australian bush.

Opening Friday 12 April 7-9pm, all welcome. Saturday and Sunday 13-14 April 11am -3pm.

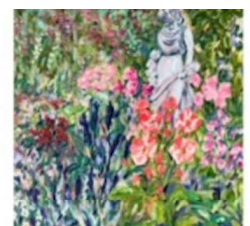
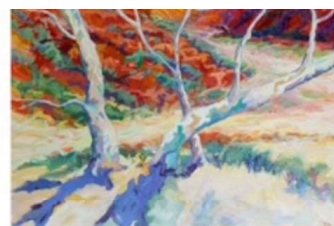
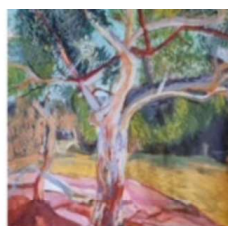


Alchemy of Nature

From Dawn to Dusk

From Dawn to Dusk is a collaborative exhibition of predominantly landscape artworks by Janice Ralph, Janet Cheetham and Trevor Armitage.

Their exhibition showcases the artists' extensive travels and cherished moments both overseas and in Australia. Their artworks are about colour, vibrancy and intensity.



Come and meet the artists and view this vibrant exhibition. All welcome to join us for Opening Night on Friday, 17 May 2024 from 4-7pm. Saturday and Sunday 18-10 and 25-26 May 10am-5pm. A performance of Irish music 2-5pm Saturday 25 May.