



# the peninsula Observer

newsletter of the Balmain Association

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## Greetings from Balmain: The peninsula as depicted on old postcards

by Mark Calabretta

Antique and vintage postcards are valuable historical resources, well represented in many public library and museum collections.

A new historical article, free to download from the Balmain Association web site, takes us on a tour of the Balmain peninsula, including the surrounding islands, as seen through the eyes of postcard senders of a century ago. The main body of the article presents a catalogue of 86 postcards divided into the following categories:

- Views of Balmain buildings and amenities.
- District views of Balmain seen from inside Balmain.

- District views of Balmain seen from outside Balmain.
- Views seen from Balmain.
- Balmain Ephemera.

Each postcard is described, with a brief discussion of its historical context and significance. Being of primary significance, the back of each postcard is always shown where available.

The article begins with an introduction to the history of postcards, including some secrets that may help in dating them. Appendices discuss Sydney postcard manufacturers, specifically those who produced the postcards in the catalogue, as well as other postcard esoterica.

All original historical research is fully referenced.

Postcards from the article were featured in an exhibition at the Watch House for History Week last year, and again over the summer break. Work on the second edition is well underway. Already there have been some marvellous new finds. If you have a postcard relating in some way to Balmain that is not represented in the catalogue we would love to hear from you!

Greetings from Balmain: A catalogue of postcards from the peninsula, may be downloaded from the Balmain Association web site, <https://balmainassociation.org.au/balmain-research>.



Darling St, Rozelle circa 1925, looking south from its intersection with Merton St towards Victoria Rd.

# Submission to Placemaking NSW's Ballast Point Park— Future Management Plan

Past and present members of the Balmain Association (BA) were advocates for, and supporters of, the creation of Ballast Point Park (BPP).

The BA was extremely active in gaining Community and Government support for the purchase of the site from Caltex and its repurposing into a harbourside heritage park and the heritage exhibits within BPP are also a result of this activity by Balmain Association members.

The Balmain Association submits the following responses to the Placemaking NSW BPP Future Management Plan Survey:

1. Preserve and maintain the existing printed metal static display on the top-level near the Ballast Point Road entry.

There is space within the section for additional printed metal panels to expand and enhance the heritage story. The Balmain Association could suggest content for such panels if this suggestion is adopted by Placemaking NSW.

2. Rejuvenate the Menevia static display and make it more inviting to passers-by, easier to read and expand on the content such as the crockery samples, replacing those missing pieces as far as possible. Clean or replace the obscured whitewashed display windows.

Importantly, there needs to be sun shelter at the Menevia site for

both people and the display. A simple slatted/frosted glass roof awning similar to the toilet block roof structures within BPP would suffice.

3. Gaining support to have the Federal Government make funds available to purchase the land for BPP was a long and arduous

Ballast Point into a Park. The Balmain Association would like to see a symbol of recognition identifying the many people (not just those within the Balmain Association) and groups both past and present who actively contributed throughout process. Many Balmain, Birchgrove and

Rozelle locals along with others living outside of the Balmain peninsula, contributed time, expertise and funds to make Ballast Point Park a reality, thus saving it from development for medium density housing.

4. BPP must remain as an open and safe space for recreation, accessible to users of all ages, for both locals and people visiting the area, with or without pets, as well as the growing number of possums, brush turkeys, lizards, birds and other wildlife that either live in or visit BPP.

The Balmain Association also appreciates the presence of security staff who are generally friendly and obliging, and we exhort Placemaking NSW to continue to ensure safe and open access to BPP for walking, jogging, boules, picnics, recreational fishing, barbecues, social gatherings or just enjoying its spectacular harbour views, plus our much-treasured local wildlife. This includes, in our submission, enforcing "on-leash" status for dogs in

the whole of the park, so that other users such as picnickers and non-dog owners may enjoy their time on the grassy spaces in peace.



BPP contains two static heritage displays on the top-level of BPP, aimed at sharing local heritage with all who visit.

1. Exhibit on top-level near Ballast Point Road entry: This static print exhibit on painted metal plaques attached to the metal handrail tells the story of Ballast Point's evolution from the time of the traditional owners, the Wangal Clan, to its maritime, and industrial development.

2. The Menevia Marine Villa display along the main top-level pathway

The main pathway is deliberately interrupted by original sandstone foundations of the Menevia Marine Villa. The villa fell into disrepair and the estate, including the grand sandstone gates that were installed at Ballast Point Road, was demolished when the Texaco/Caltex grease works were established.

A static display with secure glass cabinets and with printed photographs on metal plastic coated panels tells the story of the purchase of the peninsula by Thomas Perkins in 1852, the subsequent building of the villa on its highest point, Menevia's grandeur and eventual demise. Unfortunately, this display has fallen into disrepair and/or been vandalised, which diminishes its visual appeal and informative value. The display needs refurbishment and security from vandals.

task taking several years. In fact, in the 1920s, a failed attempt was made to resume and repurpose

# From the Archives

by Helen Carter

The Balmain Association (BA) uses two rooms of the Watch House for housing its archives. Over the past few months, our framed material has been revisited with the aim of removing all the frames in order to allow easier access and preserve their contents, including digitisation. Like most archive repositories space and relevance is often an issue today. During this process two of the artworks have thrown up interesting backstories.



Nancy Surridge (later Allen) was born in Paddington, NSW in 1919 and grew up in Balmain. A student at Birchgrove Primary School who loved drawing and learned to swim at the Balmain Baths later known as the Dawn Fraser Pool. Her charming small naive water colours on paper in paper mache frames are of houses in Birchgrove where she lived. When given to the BA they had come from hanging on her wall at home when she and her husband moved. Nancy's parents Percy and Maud Surridge were English and had made a last minute decision to cancel their tickets on the Titanic in 1912

and travel to Australia instead of America. This change of plan was because her father's brother Jack, was travelling with them and his doctor had recommended that they travel to a warmer climate due to his having asthma. After the war Nancy married Jim Allen at Birchgrove.

Another artist born at Oatley, NSW in 1914 was Frank Joseph Charles Marjason. He didn't live in Balmain yet his artworks at the Watch House has important connections

with the area. Marjason studied art in the 1950s with Louis Kahan at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and later took lessons in the late 1960s with John Coburn in Canberra.

Marjason's work of Cockatoo Island is registered as "on loan" to the BA on behalf of the Friends of Cockatoo Island (FOCI). Although Marjason exhibited his woodcuts at the Watch House this particular piece was produced for the lobby group FOCI who had formed in May 1995 to stop

the Government selling off Cockatoo Island. An attempt to return the painting came to a dead end as the lobby group does not exist to day. Cockatoo was not sold off.

Frank's painting contrasts sharply with Nancy's work – Frank had academic training. His contemporary use of acrylic paint on his 60cm x 90cm stretched canvas was created to stir public opinion.

Both these contrasting stories and the merit of their artworks created at differing times are important for inclusion in our collection however just as important is the work of artists who exhibit each week at the Watch House and their contribution to restoring this historic building and bringing life to the charge room and cells. Perhaps it is time for a retrospective exhibition to honour some of those artists who were the early exhibitors here.



# Lever Bros Soapery Works, Balmain

by Jim Longworth



Looking across the works from the copra gantry. Punch Park can be seen over the roof of the multi-arched facade of the Soapery building. Between 1920 and 1932, author's collection.

**William H Lever** was the first person to stamp soap with a brand name and wrap it before selling the product to the public. The brand was 'Sunlight' soap, the year was 1885. Following success with British customers, Lever decided to market Sunlight soap in other parts of the world. Lever Brothers opened an office in Sydney in December 1888. The office repacked and distributed imported products from Port Sunlight in Britain to local merchants. Also copra was brought from the Pacific islands and tallow from Australia. Both were exported as raw materials back to Port Sunlight. This second function of the Sydney office is the key to our understanding development of the Balmain works. Lever visited Australia in 1895 and bought a site with water frontage on White Bay in Balmain, as a precaution, in case he later decided to build a factory here. Prior to Australian federation, NSW was free from tariff protection, which probably influenced Lever's decision to establish his factory in NSW, rather than in another Australian

colony. A copra crushing mill and oil storage tanks were built to start with, while work on building a soap manufacturing plant, a 'soapery', commenced in 1899. The factory commenced operations in October 1900.

Several networks of narrow gauge railway tracks were operated around the Balmain site.

## **Elevated Copra Runway**

Copra is dried coconut flesh from inside the shell, from which oil can be extracted.

The overhead runway was an elevated narrow gauge tramway that ran straight along a substantial wooden gantry from the wharf into the first floor of the Copra Store. Standing on the gantry a Winchman operated a steam powered crane that swung high above to lift bags of copra out of the hold of the ship being unloaded. As the bags were swung up onto the gantry, they were deftly opened and emptied into the iron truck that was standing on a weighbridge on top. Bulk loose copra was received in lighters at the wharf. There it

was shoveled into a basket, which was lifted up onto the gantry by a steam winch, and emptied into the waiting truck. As the truck was filled the load was recorded. Loaded trucks weighed two tons. When full, the truck was released and ran, by gravity, down the line straight through a rooftop doorway, into the great, red-tiled, Copra Store. Inside the store the line ran along high up among the rafters. Once over the point where the copra was to be dumped, the side doors of the truck were opened automatically by a moveable tripping block. As the truck rushed along, it released a trigger which then activated a counterweight which was powerless against the weight of the loaded truck. The trigger then drew a lever wherever the truck was to be emptied, allowing the hopper doors to fall open. Copra rained down into the store below. 180ft long by 50ft wide, the copra store had a capacity of 3,000tons. The empty truck was automatically returned from the store to the end of the wharf by a balance weight system.

An enormous electric arc light turned night into day. The absence of man-handling at Balmain was the reverse of loading Copra into the ships in the Tropics, where the work was entirely manual.

### Wharf Line

At ground level, a line ran from buildings in the heart of the works down to the wharf, used for transporting bags full of copra from the wharf up to the factory. The wharf area was once laced by narrow gauge tracks. Rolling stock consisted of several small 4-wheel flat wagons.

One early proposal shows a small 0-4-4 saddle tank steam locomotive on the line; but it was probably more artistic hyperbole than a se-

ried up at the wharf to the works. The line was also extended across the site to beside the Cooper Building.

### Soapery Lines

A network of 2ft gauge underground lines running around the barrel-vaulted catacombs underneath the Soapery building. Vaults were 6ft 9in wide by 6ft 6in high to the apex of the barrel. Turntables were 5ft 4in diameter. Rail had a 1¼in wide head, stood 2¾in high, on a flange 2½in wide, equating to about 20lb/yd.

### Edible Fats Lines

Another network of underground tracks ran around the edible fats section of the works on the north

and probably once ran through more of them.

### Closing Down

The copra gantry was demolished during 1956, to be replaced with a fixed jib-crane and an endless conveyor belt, rising from wharf deck level up into the roof space of the copra store. During 1989 a works at North Rocks was opened to centralise manufacturing of personal products, while soaps and detergents continued to be manufactured at Balmain. Increasing production of synthetic detergents and use of oil from Australian grown seeds reduced the demand for copra. The entire copra store and oil mill were closed during 1971.



Looking along the elevated tramway for coal delivery. Two side tipping 'V' skips have just been emptied, February 1939, Mitchell Library collection.

rious proposal. Another enigmatic reference is to the one time use of 'track engines' that were later replaced by 'cheeky little motors [that] run anywhere and everywhere, pushing and hauling little trucks about'. Could these 'track engines' have been small industrial railway locomotives? Probably not. More probably they were small tow motor industrial trucks.

### Elevated Coal Line

A double track elevated tramway for the delivery of coal from ships

western side of Hyam Street. Retail margarine, as a butter substitute, was restricted by legislation in Australia until about 1908. Production of table margarine, with >10% vegetable oil, was constrained by legislation through setting quotas until 1955. Both were simply to protect the local dairy industry. Four tunnels ran under Hyam St, so providing unhindered connection between the Soapery and Edible Fats sections of the works. Track is known to have run through at least one of the tunnels,

The Balmain site was gradually wound down over the 1970s-80s, with transfer of manufacturing operations to a new factory at Minto. All production at Balmain had ceased by 1988. The Balmain works was progressively demolished during the early 1990s.

### The Site Today

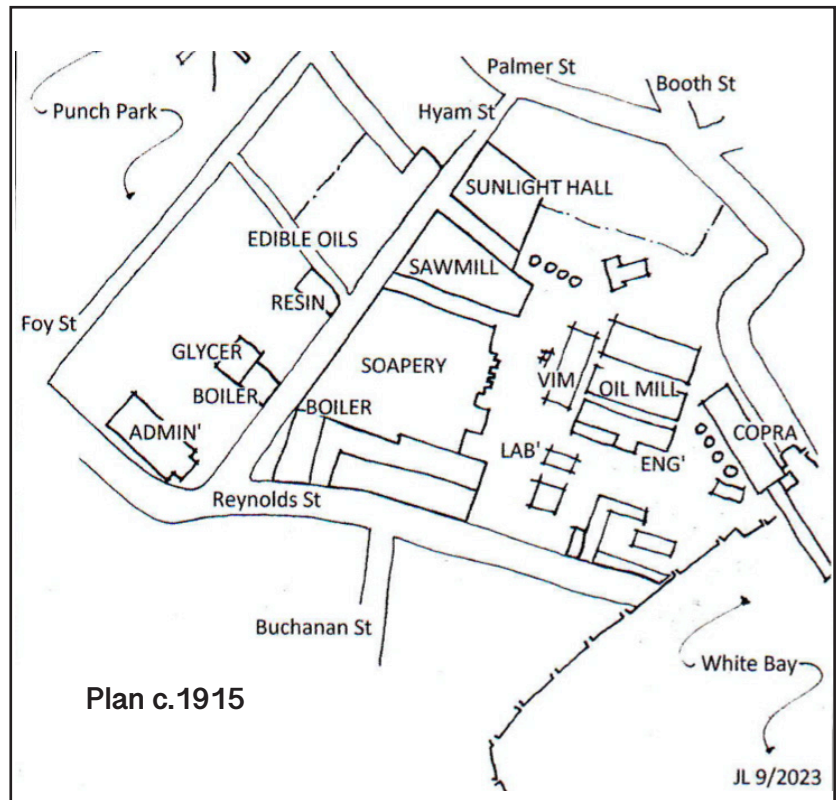
While the factory has been largely demolished and replaced with blocks of home units, sitting among manicured lawns and

# Lever Bros Soapery Works, Balmain



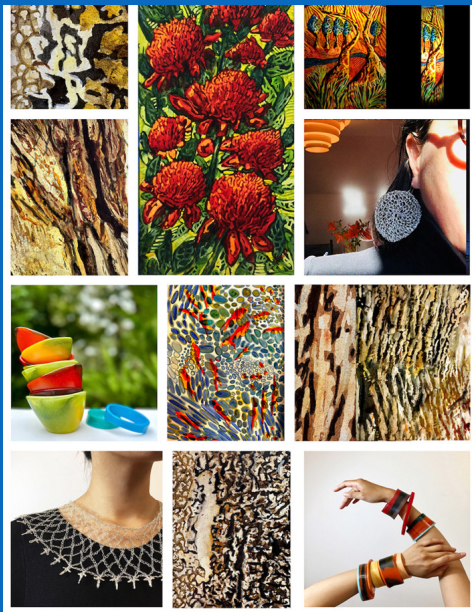
The Ovalu seen here discharging copra via the copra gant. The Westland is being loaded with casks of oil. Photo: Sydney Mail, 19 February 1898.

planted trees, five of the more attractive brick-built buildings remain. The most notable is that of the former Copra Store. The small gablet into which once ran the copra runway in the south-east elevation has been retained and glazed. Behind this building on the landward side, are a group of three buildings all close together. The one facing south-west was the Engineering building. The one north-east of that, now stretching along the newly formed Rosebery Place, was the Oil Mill. Across the north-western ends of these is what was the Vim building. Nestled inside the corner of Reynolds Street is what was the Administration building.



# What's on at the Watch House

Please check the Balmain Association website [www.balmainassociation.org.au](http://www.balmainassociation.org.au) for up-to-date information on art exhibitions.



## Peregrinations

Is a journey through the breadth of award-winning artist **Rita Orsini's** art practice over two decades, including her signature Orsini Lights, her Osso Buco and OMA resin and silver jewellery, paintings on canvas and on paper, art t-shirts and scarves printed to her designs. This extensive exhibition culminates in the captivating multisensory exhibit, Into the Wood, an immersive spectacle of art, light and sound, in a dedicated space of the gallery. In conjunction with the exhibition, Rita Orsini has curated a public program, free and open to all, with a poetry-reading session in English and in French on 14 July and an experimental painting workshop on 21 July (material included, beginners welcome).

13-14 and 20-21 July 2024  
10am to 5pm



Opening Friday 12 July 6-9 pm All Welcome



## Lasting Impressions

**Open Studio Printmakers** at Meadowbank TAFE showcases the many talents of our artists in this exhibition. Bold abstract work to delicate techniques like etching; lino prints, woodcuts, monoprints and collagraphs will also be displayed, using colour, shapes and textures, inviting a response by the viewer that leaves a lasting impression.

3-4 and 10-11 August 2024  
10am to 4pm

# What's on at the Watch House



## Life is a Joy

Original Oil Paintings by Martial's Cosyn at his first solo outing since his exhibition at Balmain's Watch House during 2019.

Martial Cosyn a passionate observer of the everyday. Whether a street scene, the depiction of a restaurant kitchen or still life, he paints what he sees with whimsy and humour. Martial's lively compositions convey movement, colour, playfulness with a keen eye for character and detail, but above all else they are pure joy.

29 August - 1st September 2024  
10am to 5pm

## 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, and
- 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](http://www.balmainassociation.org.au)

Postal: PO Box 57 Balmain 2041

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