



the peninsula Observer

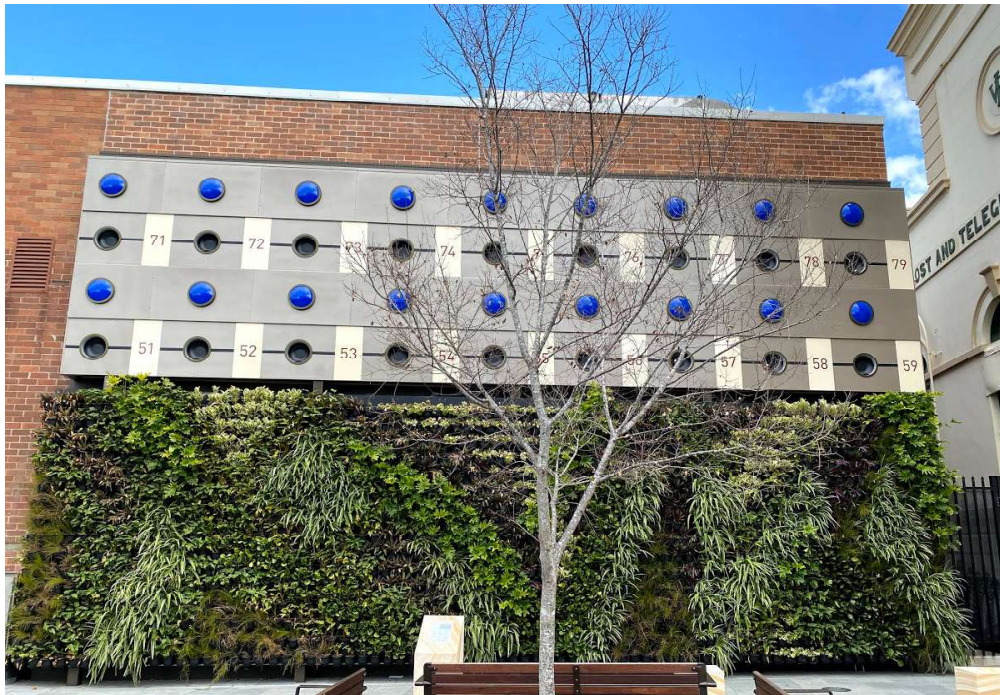
newsletter of Balmain Association

Vol. 56 No. 3 Issue 359

Founded November 1965

September 2021

Connecting you now by Duncan MacAuslan



The new park between the telephone exchange and the Post Office was opened recently. Sue Callanan's design, Connecting You, is of an old-style manual plug switchboard (see *Peninsula Observer*, December 2020, page 3). This has prompted some questions over when telephones first arrived in Balmain and when was a switchboard like this in use.

Telephones, as we know them, were invented by Alexander Bell in 1876 (there's a dispute about this!). They arrived in Australia shortly after, in 1879, in Melbourne.

At first, phones were in pairs hard wired together and it was not long before some means of connecting many phones together was needed. The solution, the switchboard, was developed in 1880, the first being in Connecticut in 1880.

The Melbourne Telephone Exchange company opened in 1881 with 70 lines and an exchange was established in Sydney shortly after.

Henry Perdriau was so excited by the idea that in 1879 he named one of his ferries Telephone in anticipation. He was reported as Balmain's first subscriber with a line to his city office in Erskine Street. Mort's dock also installed a line to their office in the city in 1880.

By 1887 it was clear to Jacob Garrard that an exchange was required but he needed 15 subscribers in Balmain before the NSW Post-Master General would approve one. After some pressure his request was approved in 1887 but as with many things no action was taken.

The Balmain Post Office was built in 1888 and in May 1893 a telephone bureau was established there. This was a collection of public pay phones, available from 9am until 8pm where calls could be made through the Sydney Exchange for 6d. In 1895 there were only 37 subscribers in Balmain.

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From the Balmain Association

by Duncan MacAuslan

For the second time in less than two years we find ourselves in lockdown with the Balmain Watch House closed and meetings being held online.

Several exhibitions have been cancelled and we cannot predict whether those described in this issue of the *Peninsula Observer* will actually be held.

Keep checking our website balmainassociation.org.au that we will keep up-to-date with exhibitions and any cancellations.

When visitors and exhibitors are able to finally return to the Watch House, they will notice a revamped kitchen with new fittings and water service.

This was funded by a Community Development Grant provided through local MP Jamie Parker.

Our history and archives group has been busy in the meantime and has been responding to queries on family and house history.

And it has also prepared updates to some of our publications. *Called to the Bar* was published in 1991 and in the intervening 30 years much has changed on the Balmain pub scene.

Only one publican remains from then, Maureen at the Royal Oak. The present closures mean there may be more changes.

There's still a bit of work to do but we hope to publish the new edition before the end of the year.

Our pamphlet series of Balmain and Rozelle walks are also in need of updating. Again, in the 30 years since first published there have been quite a few changes. The first to be updated is *Balmain East*, previously *Old Balmain* that should be available in October this year. The others will be reviewed during 2022.

Balmain Association member Jan Wood is preparing a history of the Balmain Hospital. What started as a small task, to prepare a 16 page booklet, has morphed into a fully detailed history.

Jan is getting assistance from NSW Health to document the story of both the institution and its importance to the peninsula's people.

The story of the Watch House itself is fascinating and Sarah Cuppitt, great granddaughter of Ira and Eliza Gray, the police family who lived at the Watch House, is preparing a booklet on the place's history.

And finally, we have sold out of *Balmain Peninsula Transport History* and a revised second edition is planned.

When we reopen, please feel free to visit the Watch House on Tuesdays between 11am and 1pm or Saturdays from 11:30pm until 3pm. We welcome volunteers and new ideas.

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Covid 19 update

Please note that art exhibitions and other events mentioned in this newsletter will be subject to any Covid 19 restrictions that may apply at the time.

From the archives

by Helen Carter

Recently there has been lots of media coverage about a certain CEO rewarding four employees with timepieces.

This article is about another very special timepiece that was presented by the Sydney employees of Lever Brothers Limited to their Chairman, Mr Meek over 100 years ago.

Lever Brothers was a British manufacturing company started by two brothers. One of them, William Lever and his wife Elizabeth visited Australia in 1892 and bought land in Balmain.

By 1897 an oil plant had been built on the land they bought (on the corner of Reynolds and Hyam Streets) and was in operation.

Prior to setting up production here, soap was made in their factory in England and distributed from a warehouse in Clarence Street, Sydney.

By 1902 the office and warehouse was centralised at Balmain and shortly after other departments were added such as printing and casemaking for packing their products on site.

Mr Meek, was a son of Irish parents and when he finished school he worked for Ward & Co Ltd printers and publishers and within 15 years had become managing director of more than 500 employees.

Shortly after his rise to success he was interviewed by William Lever and was employed in the printing department of Port Sun Light, near Liverpool.

The Levers were progressive employers providing a model village to house employees who

worked in the soap factory.

Now a global company, Lever Brothers looked to Mr Meek for help with the reorganisation of their overseas branches.

After 18 months in Canada, Meek was sent on to Sydney and in 1903 becomes managing director and chairman of Lever Brothers, positions he held for 22 years.

On January 5, 1910, after Mr Joseph Meek, Esq, and his wife returned from overseas to the Balmain plant, they were presented with an exquisite dark green leather tooled folder made by their employees.

The folder is 39 x 33 centimetres and in perfect condition. The two large watercolours seen right are framed by moire taffeta.

The smaller vignettes are of the ship they returned on, an aerial view of the plant, inside the oil mill and the following message from staff "... a hearty welcome back to your adopted countryand ask you to accept this Souvenir Address as an expression of our sincere congratulations on your safe return."

By 1970, having lost its waterfront to the container wharf development at White Bay, the Balmain plant had wound down and by 1988 Unilever ceased operation.

The Balmain Association also holds indenture papers for a number of apprentices between 1911 and 1929, photographs, posters advertising Pears Soap, some copies of its newssheet, *The Washing Post* and examples of its products.



Images above and below from a tooled folder presented to Joseph Meek and his wife by their employees



History

on our side

by Bill Ryall

Ballast Point Park was almost lost to the community as early as 1842!

Most people living on the Balmain Peninsula know Ballast Point Park was proposed for development as a residential estate (for 183 apartments) in the 1990s and when this was refused by the then Leichhardt Council the developer proposed an industrial estate with many truck movements each day through the narrow streets of Balmain and Birchgrove.

Most people know the devoted activism of many long-term, persistent Balmain/Birchgrove residents over a period of 15 years, the steadfast support of Leichhardt Council and lobbying the State Government by Tom Uren and Paul Keating saved the site and resulted in its dedication as a park in 2002.

What most people don't know, however, is that in 1842, the land at Ballast Point was owned by George Cooper, but foreclosure by his financiers forced him to put the land up for sale in January 1842 as 50 allotments.

The site was described as being characterised by deep water and ... *affords not only the most advantageous but economical plan for carrying out any design of either Wharf or Waterside Premises.*

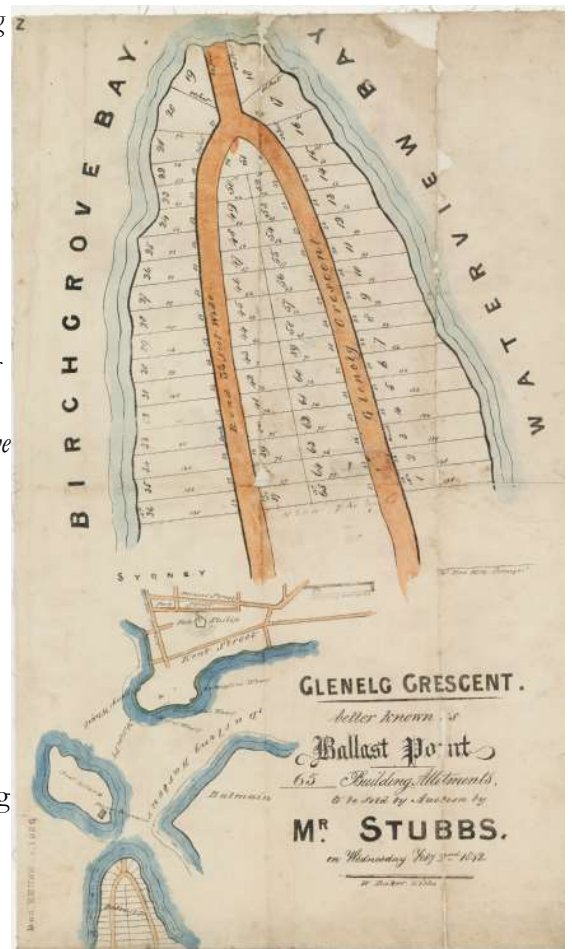
The sales pitch contained in *The Sydney Gazette* of 15 January 1842 envisaged uses, including a dry dock, berthing of steamers and that Ballast Point contained...

Excellent stone both for building or the trade is, on the Estate, most abundant ... an endless turning in of ready money is always able to be knocked out of good building material - of stone - or in the ballast trade if in the rough line... Therefore, it is important to all those who have been giving 5 or 10 pounds [money] per foot for quarrying ground, to recollect that they have just reason for laying all other purchases aside, as these [lots] most assuredly will be sold.

The sale in did not proceed and the site was again offered for sale in February 1842 as 65 residential allotments, each with frontages onto Glenelg Crescent and extending to either Birchgrove Bay (now Snails Bay) to the north, or to Waterview Bay (now Mort Bay) to the south, as shown on the accompanying plan of the proposed subdivision (plan provided from archives of the State Library of NSW).

However, the sale of the land did not eventuate and the land was purchased in 1852 by Thomas Perkins who built the grand villa Menevia. Ballast Point at this time became known as Perkins Point.

In 1928 the site was purchased by the Texas Oil Company (Texaco),



Early map of Birchgrove and Waterview Bays.

Pic. courtesy of Bill Ryall

later Caltex, and was used as an oil terminal and grease manufacturing plant until about 1994.

The community is fortunate the land on the Ballast Point headland was purchased by Texaco who remained the sole owner until the 1990s when a committed group of residents became “woke” to the benefits of preserving access by the community to the harbour and its prominent headlands.

The ownership of Ballast Point by one legal entity allowed the site to be developed as a park. If the land at Ballast Point had been developed for residential purposes in 1842, the probable ownership of lots by many parties would not have allowed the land to be converted into the iconic park that occupies the entire Ballast Point headland giving so much enjoyment to the community, especially in these troubled times of COVID isolation.



Ballast Point Park today. Pic. courtesy of Fiona Rivers

From the ground up

History Week 2021

By Helen Carter

The Balmain Association is using the History Council's theme to focus on chimney stacks for its photographic exhibition at the Balmain Watch House to be held from September 4 to 19 (subject to Covid 19 restrictions).

This year the History Council of NSW has asked us to reflect on: *What kind of histories do we most need today to heal the past and usher in a fresh hope for the future?*

Nineteenth century chimney stacks are emblematic of our industrial past. Built from the ground and towering into the sky they burnt coal spewing out smoke causing pollution, health problems and damage to our ecology.

For example, these brick towers dominated the Balmain and White Bay Power Stations, Elliott Chemical Works, Booth & Co timber mills, Lever Bros, Colgate-Palmolive and Balmain Hospital. Today, the White Bay Power Station and the Balmain Hospital stacks survive but do not operate as chimneys.

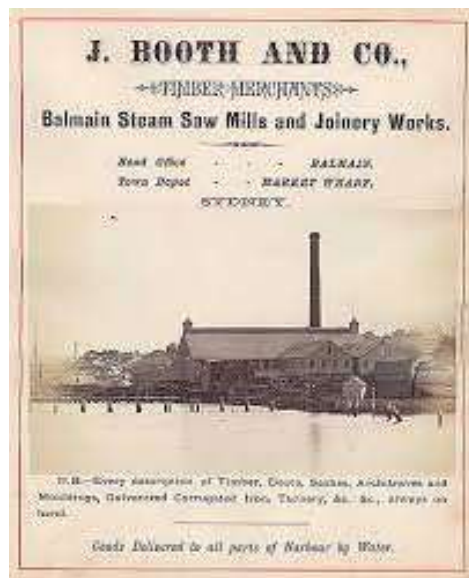
In 1999, the White Bay Power Station was listed on the NSW State Heritage Register and its chimney stacks and buildings will survive into the future ensuring that its industrial history and physical presence are secured.

It is often said 'history repeats itself'. The Balmain Association and the local community, however, have objected strongly to the modern chimney stacks being threatened by the NSW Government for the development of WestConnex and the Harbour Tunnel.

While their discharges will be invisible they will still pose a danger to the health of the community.

We hope that you can all visit the exhibition and appreciate the historic images that helped shape our history and the colour images of today that represent a fresh hope for the future.

Ed. note: unfortunately due to the ongoing Covid 19 situation the History Week exhibition has been cancelled.



Poster for J. Booth and Co. Balmain Steam Saw Mills and Joinery Works courtesy of Helen Carter

Continued from page 1

Another bureau was established in Balmain East's post office.

A manual exchange was installed in a room in the Post Office, shared with other activities, by 1892.

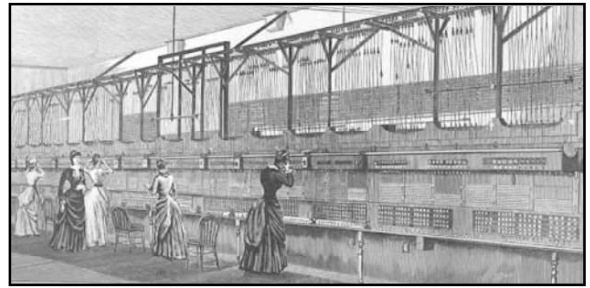
At first it was only served during working hours. A new dedicated building was begun in 1911 and the manual exchange was replaced by an automatic Strowger exchange (named after its inventor who was an undertaker) in 1914.

So how did the manual exchanges work? In front of the operator were two rows of paired plugs, a row or two of trunk sockets, and a board with rows of numbered subscriber sockets and indicators (the blue discs in the design).

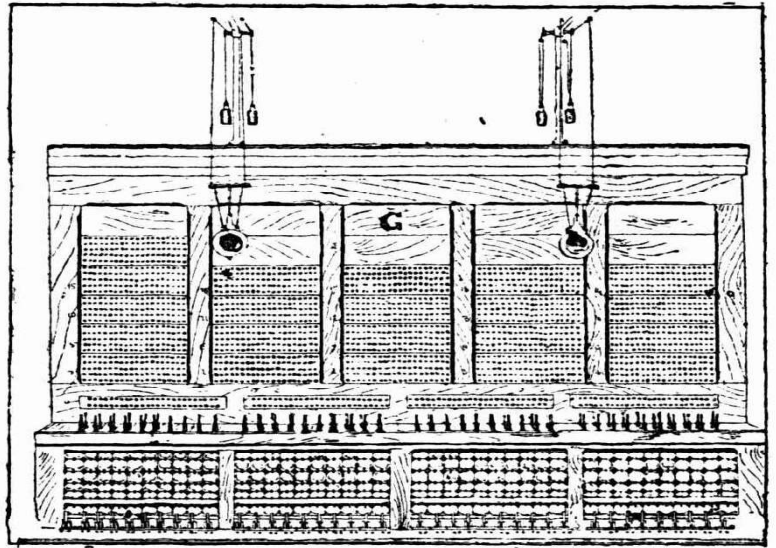
When a subscriber lifted their handset an indicator next to their socket let the operator know they wanted a line. The operator inserted one of the plugs into the socket, flicked a switch to activate their headphones and microphone, and asked the subscriber who they wanted to call.

If the called number was on their board, they inserted the adjacent plug into the board and pressed another button making the called phone ring. If the subscriber was in another exchange the operator would connect the adjacent plug of the pair into one of the trunk sockets and, while the subscriber was still listening in, talk to the remote operator.

These small manual exchanges survived well into the 20th century in small businesses. I



Victorian Telephone Exchange, 1886.
Melbourne's first privately owned exchange



Plug in exchange

The Balmain Association Inc. representing Balmain, Birchgrove and Rozelle

Since 1965 we 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

Postal: PO Box 57 Balmain 2041

Material from this newsletter is not to be reproduced without acknowledgement.

What's on at the Watch House

Julie Miller Colour Stories

'Expression of colour is everything! I love the way colour creates an emotional response, it is my inspiration.

My ambition is to capture something transient in what I see and feel in the world around me.

This is Balmain, the harbour and the northern beaches where I grew up and still feel drawn to.

My subjects are nature - whether it's a traditional landscape, still life or watercolours.

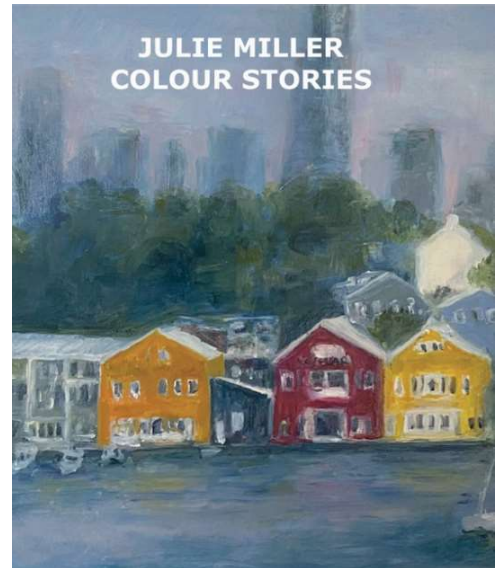
I use traditional materials of oil paint on canvas and board and watercolour on paper.

I look forward to welcoming you to my exhibition.'

Opening Friday, September 24, 6pm to 8pm

Saturday, September 25, 11am to 6pm

Sunday, September 26, 11am to 4 pm



Value of Hands

The Value of Hands, an exhibition in conjunction with the Australian Design Centre's Sydney Craft Week, is a wonderful opportunity to see a large variety of crafts made by handmade artisans dedicated to their craft. Every day is an opportunity to meet the members of craftnsw and learn more about the craft they love. Thursday, 14 October is an all-day of meeting the makers including our inspiring guest exhibitors.

Our textile range includes hand woven scarves, shawls, garments, high quality hand knits, painted silks, eco dyeing, hand embroidery, Korean hand sewn accessories, shibori and showcases a guest

exhibitor with exciting new work. Timber features marquetry of stunning coloured timber designs and our new wood carver member carving wonderfully sensitive work. There will be ceramics in a range of techniques and designs and we are showcasing two ceramic guests. The range goes on to include decoupage, glass and paper collage work.

Opening night Friday, October 8, 6pm to 8 pm. 'Craft up Late', Thursday, October 14, 10am to 8pm. Closing day

Sunday, October 17, 10am to 3pm. Every other day open 10am to 6pm.

Web: www.artsandcraftsnsw.com.au

Instagram: @craftnsw

Facebook: craftnsw

Our beautiful world

Local artist Neil Saville will be exhibiting a collection of both streetscape and portrait art depicting local scenes and famous people. Neil is giving away a framed A3 artwork at the conclusion of the exhibition.

Everyone who attends will be eligible.

Instagram: ndsav_art

Facebook: Neil Saville

Saturday, October 23 and Sunday 24, 10am to 7pm

Opening Friday 22, 5pm to 8pm.

All welcome.



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.



Impressions from Balmain and Afar 2021

We invite you to attend the biennial exhibition of the latest artworks from the Balmain Artists at the Balmain Watch House.

The artists are Barbara Hamilton, Carlie Lopez, Jenny Saunders Thompson, Corinne Gaston and Allan Coker. Our artworks include a range of watercolours, ink and acrylic paintings, impressionist photography, ceramics and sculpture.

Many works reflect our personal impressions of the beauty and character of the local Balmain Peninsula, as well as works inspired by our past travels and from our personal interests. You can see some of our works on our website, www.balmainartists.com. All works are for sale for cash at affordable prices - some unframed.

The exhibition is for one weekend only.

Our opening night is on Friday, November 12, 6pm to 8pm. We will be following a COVID safe plan with distancing and masks as required at the time. You are very welcome to share a glass of wine with us to celebrate.

Then we are open 10am - 4pm, Saturday 13 and Sunday 14 November 21.

Intertwined

This exhibition presents the work of Fiona Chaplin and Gail Barfod and is inspired by their love of nature and the play of colour and design in the natural world. With bold colours, organic shapes and mark making, each artist expresses what it means to step through the tangled world we live in and capture the essence of a place.

Connecting with the beauty and strength in the intimacy of the landscape, one stands still and breathes deeply. Artists come together to find that deep connection we are all looking for. An expression of who we are and where we are going: 'intertwined, we raise our creative voices and ask you to step into our world.'

Opens Friday, December 3 to Sunday, December 5 and Wednesday, December 8 to Sunday, December. Hours 11am to 6pm
Opening party: Friday, December 3, 6pm to 8pm. All welcome!

