

MOSMAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER – June 2014

UPCOMING HISTORICAL SOCIETY EVENTS

NEXT MEETING:

Wednesday 9th July, at Mosman Library, starting at 7 pm

Speaker is Jody Rose on “Song Without End... Hopefully! Mosman Musical Society’s Past, Present and Future”. This talk will include a special treat for members - musical interludes by members of the company. See attached flyer for more information.

September speaker: An authority from the Mosman Parks and Bushland Association.

For your diary: Wednesday 19th November 2014: DAYLIGHT SAVING EXCURSION TO THE SPIT. Discover the history, find hidden plaques, then enjoy our famous Mosman Historical Society barbecue. Starts 5.30 pm.

OTHER EVENTS:

We have been kindly invited by North Shore Historical Society to join them on an excursion to the Powerhouse Discovery Centre, Castle Hill, on Wednesday 20th August 2014. This is a unique opportunity to view fascinating objects rarely put on display. Cost \$28, plus lunch at own cost (at Castle Hill RSL). 12 places only available. See attached flyer for full details.

NEWS:

Regretfully we report the death of Mrs Margaret McWilliam, honorary life member of Mosman Historical Society. Margaret was a longstanding committee member of the Society in past years, a proud Mosmanite dedicated to preserving and teaching the history of our suburb. She conducted tours around the area to share her knowledge and enthusiasm with others and was responsible for much of the compilation of ‘Streets of Mosman’. Margaret was 98 years old.

MOSMAN PAST: CROSSING THE SPIT

As Sydney’s settlement spread north towards Manly and the Warringah peninsular, the Spit became an obstacle to travellers. Flanked by high rocky bluffs at either end, the steep approaches and shifting sand made land access difficult, and strong currents and sometimes high winds hampered crossings by boat.

In 1830 Barney Kearns introduced a ferry service in an open rowing boat from Rosherville Beach to Clontarf, the overland alternative being a 70 mile journey. In 1850 Peter Ellery began a regular cable operated hand punt service across the Spit, though only pedestrians or mounted travellers, not horsedrawn vehicles, could manage the descent and ascent of the precipitous tracks at each side. By 1880 these roads had been realigned, thus enabling the carriage of vehicular transport on the punt, at a cost of 1/6 for a horse and cart, and 6d for foot passengers. A bell attached to a lamppost was rung to alert the punt operator that a passenger was waiting.

The punt service was sold to the government in 1888, and in this year also, overloaded

with five fully laden brick drays, the punt lost stability and sank. The crossing was out of action for some time causing great inconvenience to travellers. In 1889 the hand punt was replaced by a steam operated service with a capacity of 7 vehicles, and eventually two punts were running side by side with a combined capacity of 28 vehicles.

Passenger traffic increased with the extension of the tram service from Spit Junction to the Spit in 1900, and a new service from the Spit to Manly in 1911. Trams did not cross on the punt. Passengers alighted, caught the punt across, and connected with another tram on the other side. The tram service required, on the Mosman side, the building of another road, Lower Spit (now Parriwi) Road, going around rather than over the headland. This was completed by 1898, and the sand spit gradually raised and stabilised, making the approach to the punt more suitable for road traffic and trams. Such improvements resulted in even more traffic across the Spit, and in the early 20th century, anticipation of a bridge in the near future accelerated land subdivisions, particularly in Seaforth and Balgowlah. By the 1920s this growing population, and increased mobility provide by the motor car, made the need to replace the punt with a bridge an urgent priority. An hour's wait to cross on the punt was not unusual on weekends and summer holidays, and commuter traffic caused similar congestion during peak hour. Finally, by 1923, the need for a bridge became imperative, and moves for its construction finally got under way.

Agitation for a bridge had begun many years before in the 1880s, but representations to government had continually failed on the grounds of the high cost, and the small population to be served. Finally in 1922 Manly Council, in desperation, assumed responsibility itself for the cost of building a bridge, forming a sub-committee with other north shore councils most affected, including Mosman. Various options were considered, but cost determined that the eventual decision was for the construction of a low level wooden bridge, without a tramline, to be built by the Sydney Harbour Trust at a cost of £60,000. The sub-committee realised that if they held out for a high bridge, there would be no bridge, so chose to proceed with what they saw as a temporary structure, while urging the government to hasten planning of a mooted rail link with Manly. The Middle Harbour (Spit) Bridge Act (1923) provided assent for the project, and with money borrowed from the Commonwealth Bank, to be recouped by a toll, work was able to begin.

The (first) Spit Bridge was planned on purely utilitarian grounds as a temporary solution to an increasingly pressing traffic problem. The bridge was primarily constructed of hardwood timber spans supported on ironbark piers, being 720 feet in length with an 18 foot carriageway, and, for pedestrians, an additional covered walkway 6 feet wide. Two electrically driven lifting spans opened to allow shipping to pass through. Construction began in May 1924 and was virtually completed by Christmas that year, being officially opened on December 23rd 1924. Toll gates were located at either end, and two lookout boxes near the centre enabled pedestrians to enjoy views of Middle Harbour. The Spit had finally been crossed!

Though traffic in the first twelve months exceeded all expectation, there was much criticism of the utilitarian Meccano like design, described by some as an outrageous monstrosity, and by 1930 calls were being made for a more acceptable structure. The failure to include a tram track over the bridge caused great inconvenience for tram travellers who had to alight, walk across the bridge then join another tram. The covered walkway was not weatherproof, was difficult for the elderly, and ended some way from the waiting sheds at the other side. Despite protests, this situation continued until 1939, when buses finally replaced trams on the Spit to Manly route.

By 1926 traffic had increased 60% on that of the punt two years earlier, and problems of congestion, queues to pay the toll, and delays, particularly on weekends and holidays, ensued. By 1929 enough toll had been collected to repay the £60,000 loan, but Manly Council refused to abolish it as intended, planning instead to use it for bridge maintenance and for beach recreational facilities. Eventually however the toll was lifted and the bridge handed to the Public Works Department in March 1930, and in 1931 its management was passed back to Manly and Mosman councils jointly.

Despite widening and other anti-congestion measures, The Spit continued to be a bottleneck. The bridge was deteriorating and required much maintenance, so by 1949, planning began for a new bridge. Twice the width of its predecessor and allowing for 4 lanes of traffic, it was more substantial and attractive, but still at low level with an opening span. The new (current) Spit bridge, begun in 1951, finally opened in November 1958, vastly over schedule and over budget, and the old bridge was demolished the following year.