

Get ready for the 100th birthday party!

It's time to look hard at the life we've lived

The Shire has just commissioned a HISTORY of itself, to be published in 2006 to mark 100 years of Shire and Council. Back in 1906 the newly created Shire could still have been called God's Own Country. "But have population and development since turned us into Paradise Irreparably Lost?" asks **Bob Walshe**, who has spoken and written for half a century on aspects of Shire history. Here he challenges the historians as to what their approach might be.

ALL we know at present is that a group of academic historians has been commissioned by Council to produce a 100,000-word history of the Shire, perhaps 250 pages, to mark the 100th anniversary of the "Proclamation of the Shire of Sutherland" on 6th March 1906.

The few previous historians of the Shire have all been Shire residents and none have written from paid academic positions. The difference this time will be interesting.

The earliest historian was a businessman, Frank Cridland (published 1925). A Council bureaucrat, David Kirkby, wrote *From Sails to Atoms* (1970) on the first 50 years of Council, 1906-56. Retired journalist, Marjorie Hutton Neve wrote a 60-page reflection on *Bygone Days of Sutherland Shire* (1970). And Maryanne Larkin, a librarian, stopped at 1939 in her admirable *Sutherland Shire* (1998). That's all. Of course there have been institutional histories (e.g. on surf-clubs) and several local histories, among which Daphne Salt's *Sylvania* (1987) and *Kurnell* (2000) are outstanding.

So, with no substantial Shire-wide history covering events more recent than 1956, the Shire will be agog to see what emerges in this *2006 History*. Council demands it be thoroughly researched, excellently written, popularly accessible, comprehensively illustrated, spanning pre-history to the present, and giving equal weight to the natural and built environment and the structure of society... Phew! All in two-and-a-half years? Five might have been believable.

A quite special Shire

Will these academic historians begin by acknowledging that Sutherland Shire is special?

Am I being parochial about this?

Not at all. The claim is objective for three reasons. First, because Captains Cook and Phillip both landed at Kurnell, both raised the flag there

("birthplace of modern Australia"), and both had significant meetings with the Aboriginal people.

Second, because those first meetings have given Kurnell-Botany Bay a unique ("iconic") status in the eyes of Aboriginals throughout Australia.

Third, because no other local government area in Australia can claim anything like the Shire's plethora of natural assets: two great bays, three of Sydney's rivers, four national parks including the first ever (the Royal), and five or six great beaches.

So there's no bragging about this.

Will the *2006 History* provide the Shire and its Council with clear answers to (1) How have we treated that birthplace of modern Australia, Kurnell? (2) How have we handled relationships with local Aboriginal people? (3) How have we protected the Shire's remarkable natural assets?

Those could be theme questions to guide the historians' direction of research.

The slow years before 1906

Shire readers will expect a substantial account of what happened before 1906:

□ The fascinating geological change which shaped Botany Bay, Port Hacking and "the three peninsulas" – Kurnell and Cronulla, which are really sub-peninsulas, and their parent Sutherland Peninsula (to Woronora River);

□ At least a glimpse of Aboriginal pre-history; the tribes and clans of the Shire area; and their heritage sites (middens, etc);

□ The Cook and Phillip episodes;

□ Aboriginals' reactions, not least their (prophetic) disapproval of clearing, and the ravages of disease;

□ Early European settlement, beginning with Captain Birnie on Kurnell in 1815, and Thomas Holt's huge acquisitions, from 1861 onward;

□ Reasons for the slow settlement of the Shire area up to 1900.

A Shire remarkable for its abundance of natural assets – bays, rivers, bushland, spectacular coastline and great beaches.



Not a scene from Gunsmoke! These are the "famous five" councillors of the first Sutherland Shire Council of 1906 with mayor (then termed President) William Judd at the centre. Shire population was only a few thousand.

Some issues may not fit neatly

Historians know that big issues/events can disrupt the steady flow of their story. At least three such issues in the decades before 1906 clamour for attention – a chapter for each?

■ The formation of the powerful **Holt-Sutherland Estate Land Co.** in 1881 – its ownership of most of the Shire's land between Kurnell and Woronora River – requires of historians an account of how that ownership was only slowly chiselled away. Past historians give bits and pieces of explanation; now is the time for a concentrated treatment.

■ Let's do homage to the farsighted preservation of bushland by means of **national parks!** Especially the dedication in 1879 of the first park (called since 1954 the Royal National Park). Indeed, let's loudly proclaim that this was not only the first *national* park in Australia but also the first in the world: for the rival claimant, Yellowstone Park in the United States, was dedicated a few years earlier only as the park of a single *state*.

■ Then there's that name **Sutherland**. Do we owe it to Forby, John, or a careless clerk? The *2006 History* must do the research that sets this to rest. Mythology embraces Forby Sutherland, Cook's sailor who died of TB and is buried on Kurnell. No, say several researchers, we owe it to John Sutherland, the MP who pushed for the train line to go across the Georges in the 1880s. Not so, say others, it was the careless bureaucrat who left out the "o" in "Southernland", the name designated for this region by Surveyor-General Mitchell.

On the eve of 1906

A vivid account of the area of the Shire-to-be on the eve of 6th March 1906 will be expected.

□ Centrally, how powerful was the grip of the Holt-Sutherland Company on the area? (By 1875 the cashed-up Thomas Holt owned almost all the land from Kurnell-Cronulla to the Woronora River.)

□ How sharp was the hunger for land at that time? What conflicts arose?

□ What were the economic and population roots of the early settled areas: Miranda, Sutherland, Cronulla? How did they clash?

□ How relevant were the recently formed progress associations?

□ Why did State Government announce the 1906 Proclamation when the population of this large area was no more than a few thousand?

The 1906 Council and after

Much is known about the first Council, but Kirkby's account is unreadably detailed and Larkins', though very readable, is too general. Let's have a clear account of the effects of the restricted franchise, the socio-political interests of the first five councillors, and an explanation of the conflicts among them.

What will be the proportioning in the *2006 History* of what went on *within* the 1906-2006 councils and all that has happened *outside*? Will the present Council's sponsorship of this history tempt the historians to over-concentrate on a mere recital of Council decisions?

The conflicts between "conservatives" and "progressives" in the novice Council could be traced through all following councils to cast light on today's uneasy interplay of Labor, Liberal and Independent aspirants to a Council seat.

Deserving of chapters

With so much to be said about the (pre-) Shire to 1906, the commissioned historians will be at wits' end to fit the teeming post-1906 history into those 100,000 words. Here is my choice of just half a dozen unavoidable topics.

■ **Populating the Shire.** A three-stage story. (1) *By 1906*. Only 5 thousand – why so few after so long? (2) *To 1950*. Why the swift leap to 50,000? (3) *To 2006*. Why the explosion to 220,000, double the Australian rate of increase.

■ **The infrastructure story.** What is scattered through the earlier histories could well be gathered into its own chapter: The "hard" infrastructure of roads, rail, bridges, water/sewerage and electrification; and the "soft" infrastructure of schools, hospitals, shopping centres, police, fire services, garbage collection, and more.

■ **The Port Hacking Story.** An informed update is overdue of Frank Cridland's glowing 1925 writing on "the Port"! It should start with serious research into Aboriginal habitation. The wonderful marine biodiversity needs lauding to governments complacent about the accelerating damage from pollution, exotic weeds, jet-skiers and other pests.

■ **The plunder of Kurnell Peninsula.** Here's the most dramatic and tragic of the Shire's stories! From Cook's and Phillip's flag-raising, Kurnell has slid downhill all the way. The 1800s saw Holt's extensive

timber-cutting and burning of the cover on the mighty sandhills. In 1943 the assault on the dunes began; today, 85% of the sand has gone. The handful of wealthy sandminers strive for a quadruple-dip; first, truck away the dunes; second, dig out the below-ground-level sand, creating deep holes/ponds/lakes; third, fill the holes profitably with builders' waste; fourth, pull soil over the fill and sell the land for residences, resorts, golf-links, whatever. Add to sandmining the huge Kurnell refinery, the carbon plant and other industries – too much on this fragile sand-peninsula.

■ The development of the west.

The Shire west-of-Woronora was suburbanised late. It must have its own chapter. Lateness facilitated location there of two highly controversial institutions: Australia's only nuclear reactor and Australia's biggest rubbish tip. Neither would have happened if "the Menai district" had been populated earlier. Its dense settlement from the late 1970s has been spectacular – and, predictably, attended by controversy.

■ The Shire and its Council today.

The *2006 History* will surely end with a lively conspectus of "The Shire Today"? It could glance back to origins and ask: How have we treated historic Kurnell? How have we handled Aboriginal relations? How, above all, have we protected the Shire's natural assets?

It must also attempt a fair assessment of *pros* and *cons* of Council's 100 year performance: not only in the 3Rs (roads, rubbish, rates) but also in the adequacy of its responses to rising community expectations of environment protection, health and emergency services, cultural/sporting assistance, business and tourism promotion, and the fostering of volunteering.

And finally, of the COMMUNITY itself (or multi-communities?): its binding pride in this most remarkable of local government areas; its divisive political rivalries; its growing sense of having now over-reached (overdevelopment, traffic congestion, skyhigh property values); and its expectation that Council should be delivering much much more – as long as rates don't rise!

Bob Walshe has written over 60 articles on the Shire. The Sutherland Shire Environment Centre is posting them on its website. Log on to "Bob's Corner" at www.ssec.org.au/Bob.htm