

RESEARCH BULLETIN

*Registered for posting as a
publication Category B NBG8545.*

ISSN 0819-4076.

Winter, 1987

Box 220 Holme Building
University of Sydney 2006
Telephone (02) 692 2763

Number 2

KIRRIBILLI HOUSE BATHING POOL AND EARLY HARBOURSIDE POOLS IN SYDNEY : A BRIEF SURVEY

Grace Karskens

Introduction

I was commissioned in 1986 to assess the cultural significance of the stone harbourside pool at Kirribilli House, Kirribilli, N.S.W.. The pool was presumably built by merchant Adolph Feez, of Rabonne Feez and Co., who purchased a portion of the adjoining Wotonga (now Admiralty House) in 1854, and built the twin gabled house on it in the following year.

To make this assessment it was necessary first to ascertain the popularity of recreational bathing during the 1850s, and hence the likely number of private bathing pools built; and second to determine the present-day survival of such pools.

Historical Outline

A brief overview of the history of nineteenth-century bathing indicates four stages in the growth of this past-time's popularity:

Stage 1:

During the early period (1788-c1820) bathing for recreation occurred informally - convicts and ordinary settlers bathed in the sea and the rivers.

Stage 2:

From c1825-1850 bathing for ordinary people was formalised by the establishment of public baths in the Domain in Woolloomooloo Bay by order of Governor Darling in 1829.

Bathers also swam in Darling Harbour. By 1853 the Surveyor General's map of Sydney Harbour shows four public baths in Woolloomooloo Bay, as well as the Governor's Bath House (see M.L. map M4 811.15/1853/1/Sheets 1-4). However, these public baths were apparently not considered suitable for the growing wealthy and elite class - they lacked privacy, and it was probably considered inappropriate to bath with the 'lower orders'.

Stage 3:

From c1850-1880 a few private landowners began to erect sea-baths or bath-houses on their waterfront estates as an appropriate alternative to public baths. Those located from this period include Feez's Kirribilli House (1856), Gibbes' Wotonga (now demolished) by 1857, The Retreat at Glebe Point (1858), Tresco at Elizabeth Bay, c1868, and Roma, located below St Mark's church at Darling Point in Rushcutters Bay, by 1858 (demolished). A detailed map search covering harbourside settlement areas located some of these, but also showed that there were originally no pools attached to other grand houses at Potts Point, Darling Point and Elizabeth Bay (for example Lindesay, Elizabeth Bay House, Carthona), although they may have been added later. One of A. W. Allen's photograph albums shows that Carthona had a pool by the 1890s. Similarly, detailed maps show no pools at other early settlement points like Hunters Hill, Balmain, Pyrmont and the numerous bays of the north shore. By the middle of this stage, books expounding the virtues and methods of bathing and swimming had appeared in Australia, such as Jobson's A Handbook for Bathers with Hints on the Various Kinds of Baths.... These echoed the same type of publication which had appeared in England since the turn of the century.

Stage 4 :

From the 1880s to the 1920s bathing pools appear to have become a standard feature of the harbourside houses of the wealthy. They added prestige to a property in much the same way as elaborate gardens and outbuildings, croquet lawns, gardeners' cottages and so on, all symbols representing both wealth and leisure time to enjoy these things.

Contemporary illustrations of the opulent mansions of Potts Point in the 1880s show the conspicuous display of wealth in the elaborate bathing houses, terraced gardens, walls, stairs and fountains. Maps of this period show a foreshore extensively built up with reclaimed land, boat houses, jetties and pools. In contrast to the early open pools, these later areas featured bathing houses which afforded privacy - the bather would enter the water by stairs inside, without being seen.

During the great expansion of suburban areas like Drummoyne, Hunters Hill, Mosman, Neutral Bay and Cremorne in the Federation period, numerous pools were built in waterside suburbs. Arthur Wigram Allen photographed many of these during the early

twentieth century. At the same time, the 1880s also marked the beginning of swimming (as opposed to bathing) as a popular sport for ordinary people, and over the next thirty years, numerous large public baths were built by local councils. The establishment of the Balmain Amateur Swimming Club in 1884 was the first of many such clubs formed in the suburbs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It will be noted from this summary that the practice of bathing was divided along class lines, as were most aspects of sport, recreational and cultural activities. This division is reflected in the material remains.

The Field Survey

A field survey was undertaken by boat in October 1986 and located fifty three early pools of various materials and in various states of decay or modernization, use or disuse. The area covered included from Drummoyne and Hunters Hill to Mosman on the north shore, and from Rose Bay around to Balmain and Birchgrove. Each pool sighted was marked on a map of the harbour.

Generally, the field survey bears out the historical model outlined above, although few were found which could be dated from the nineteenth century. The pools usually occur in clusters of three or four, and as far as could be ascertained, were mainly associated with early twentieth century houses. Early to mid-Victorian houses were carefully examined but no definite examples were located apart from those already identified by the historical survey: Tresco (Elizabeth Bay), The Retreat (Glebe Point), Kirribilli House and Sunnyside (Kirribilli). Later Victorian pools include one in Woodford Bay at Longueville and one on Simmons Point, Balmain. There were also several open-ended enclosures lining the shores at Birchgrove which may have been pools, but now appear to be slipways. These are associated with late Victorian houses. The areas richest in surviving pools were the 1900-1920 suburbs of Drummoyne (near the Gladesville Bridge), Hunters Hill (both sides of the peninsula), Neutral Bay (Shell Cove) and Mosman, where nine pools line the east side of Mosman Bay.

Most of the pools located are built of ashlar stone, rectangular in shape, enclosing a relatively small area on the foreshore. Both Kirribilli House and Tresco pools have curved sea-walls, although the former is in a state of partial collapse. Some still have remnants of iron gates which allowed water in and kept sharks and debris out. Others simply have the gap where the gate was. Other materials include timber slats, timber piers and wire, and concrete aggregate, while one example was carved from solid rock. There were many instances of possible early pools which had been infilled or converted into slipways. There were several examples of old pools which had been modernized with recent pool fixtures. In many cases the pools are located with blocks of flats or units which replaced or stand in front of earlier houses.

