



OCEAN POOLS: a colourful contribution to our swimming culture

By Jacqui Goddard

Photography by Christopher Shain

The National Trust recently received the NSW Maritime Authority's 2006 Heritage Award for its study, 'Survey of Harbourside & Ocean Pools of the Sydney Metropolitan Region', by EJE Landscape and Christa Ludlow. Covering 29 ocean pools along Sydney's foreshores, 45 Harbour pools and many others along the NSW coast, the study reiterates the significance of pools as part of our swimming and beach cultures.

Harbourside and ocean pools mean many different things to different people. To some they are remnants from a past era; to others an important part of modern life and, to others again, they are simply attractive features of the foreshore. Despite their significance, however, they are under continual threat because of public liability issues. An aggressive marine environment causes serious maintenance issues. Add to that pollution and willful damages, and it is easy to

understand why some local councils regard them with trepidation.

However, swimming and Australians are virtually synonymous. Rock pools and pool enclosures are to be found at many Sydney beaches and sites around the Harbour; public inland pools are popular features of many suburbs, towns and cities. 'Backyard' pools are a feature of many homes, and the beach culture is alive and well.

PHOTO: *The refurbished entrance to the former Giles Hot Sea Baths (more recently known as Lloyds Baths)*



Protecting public decency

It wasn't always so however. Although the Aboriginal population was very comfortable in and around the water, their nakedness was considered a threat to morality. In the early days of the colony fear of sharks and moral outrage about nude bodies led to the prohibition (in 1833) of bathing at beaches in Sydney Cove and Darling Harbour between 6am and 8pm. In 1838 this was applied to the whole colony. In response private bath houses were built and bathing continued with the *Saturday Magazine* of 1837 noting that 'Sydney is celebrated for [good swimmers]'.

The first formal public baths were built in the Domain in about 1825. Others followed and segregated swimming became *de rigueur*. Interestingly a 'Women's Baths' still exists in Coogee despite a claim made for equitable access by a male swimmer some years back. The court upheld the segregation stating that the availability of other baths in the vicinity (Coogee has four ocean baths in close proximity – Giles

Baths, Ross Jones Memorial Pool, Women's Baths and Wylie's Baths – as well as the beach) meant there was nothing prejudicial in allowing a 'safe haven' for women and children to swim.

The Municipalities Acts of 1858 and 1867 gave local councils the authority to build baths and other recreational facilities, and many pools, or simple enclosures, were built to form a protected swimming area. Coastal pools were usually built by enhancing natural sandstone formations, but construction of sea baths was often hampered by Council's lack of legal control of areas beyond the high water mark. In 1900 the Sydney Harbour Trust was responsible for many of these and leased them to Councils, inspecting them each year and establishing regulations for safety and access.

There was often opposition to the construction of pools because it was felt by many that they encouraged 'undesirables'. This was particularly so in the early days of the colony when men, in general, chose to swim naked. Public bathing at beaches was liberalised in about 1903 although 'neck to knee' costumes were required and no mixing with the other sex or with the 'clothed public' was allowed.

Randwick Council imposed fines on swimmers for wearing costumes in public in 1910 and Archbishop Kelly felt that even watching swimming was immoral. Interestingly it was safety considerations after a drowning that, around 1911-12, led to the removal of restrictions on mixed swimming. The last real legal challenge to beach attire came in 1961 when a £3 fine was

imposed for wearing a bikini at Bondi, although occasional battles were still occurring in the 1970s and 80s over nude bathing at some harbour beaches.

In 1876 Randwick Council received complaints that men, by 'wilfully' loitering around the beach front, constrained the bathing activities of women using bathing machines. Hence in 1876 the Ladies' Baths at Coogee (later known as the Womens' Baths) were built under the southern cliff at the base of Grant's reserve in an area reportedly to have also been used by Aboriginal women.

Pools played an important role in the transition from 'bathing' to 'swimming' and the growth of swimming as a competitive sport.

Coogee played a particularly important role in the development of women's competitive swimming in Australia. Two women who patronised the Ladies' Baths were Fanny Durack and Mina (Wilhelmina) Wylie. Although the NSW Amateur Swimming Association said there was not enough money to send them to the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games, the NSW Ladies Amateur Swimming Association raised funds to which they added their own money. As a result, Durack won gold, and Wylie a silver medal. Fanny Durack was the first woman ever to win an Olympic Gold Medal in swimming. This difference in funding can still be seen in many women's sports including surfing.

Mina Wylie's father operated Wylie's Baths and, in 1922 she formed the





Randwick Coogee Ladies Amateur Swimming Club, which operated the Womens' Baths in Coogee. Wylie's Baths are a Coogee institution. Opened in 1907, the Baths feature a high timber boardwalk which virtually hangs over the rock face, and not only swimming, but a massage and a good coffee can also be found there. The baths were damaged by storms in 1974, reopened in 1978 and thoroughly restored at the turn of the 21st century. They are notable as the last of the ocean pools to charge an entrance fee. Despite this and the proximity of three other pools and a beach they are still a popular swimming and meeting spot.

The northern end of the beach was the domain of male swimmers. The Bogey Hole was originally excavated by soldiers although the date remains uncertain. In the early 1900s Giles Hot Sea baths were built using the Bogey Hole, latterly known as Lloyds Baths. These were demolished in 2000 for safety reasons although the façade still stands. The pool enclosure is still used for swimming although the west end of it has been removed.

The fourth pool at Coogee is the Ross Jones Memorial Pool, built in 1947 and named after Roscoe Samuel Jones, alderman for the East Ward 1934-1937. Today it is associated with the Coogee Penguins, a winter swimming club.

There are pools at many Sydney beaches and their popularity can be seen any summer weekend. Like Coogee, Bondi and Cronulla also have more than one. Bondi's pools are the famous Bondi Beach Pool known as the Icebergs on the southern side and Wally Meek's Pool and the Mermaid's Pool on the north. Cronulla's pools are the Cronulla Beach Pool, Cronulla Rock Pool and Cronulla Main Pool. Their continued existence is a testimony to

their ongoing role in Australian culture and recreation.

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Wylie's Baths – a Coogee institution

BOTTOM LEFT: *Plaque commemorating Mina Wylie, 1912 Olympic silver medalist*