

Club History

History of South Maroubra Surf Life Saving Club



Foundation of the surf club in 1907. South Maroubra Surf Club, founded on 1 December 1907, is one of the oldest surf lifesaving clubs in Australia. Details of the first South Maroubra Surf Club can be found in the archived minutes of the club's meetings in the 'E.S. Marks sporting collection' in file Q82 of the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Like most pioneering surf clubs in Sydney, South Maroubra Surf Club began as a lifeline brigade. The informal brigade, was formed at an impromptu meeting of about eighty surf bathers at the remote 'Pioneer camp' at the southern end of Maroubra beach on Sunday, 24 November 1907.

The surf club was established formally by that name only one week later. Dr Robert Steer Bowker chaired the meeting of 24 November. He was a Macquarie Street specialist and an honorary surgeon at Sydney Hospital. Robert Bowker's brother, Dr Cedric Bowker, a gynaecologist at Sydney Hospital, and Dr Jack Windeyer, later surgeon, obstetrician and a professor at the University of Sydney, became honorary instructors in resuscitation. The 'Pioneer camp', sometimes referred to as the 'doctors' camp', had been formed around 1906. It was one of many bush camps established at South Maroubra by men who enjoyed surf bathing and fishing.

Early rescues at South Maroubra. The initial meeting on 24 November 1907 raised funds to purchase a life line and reel at South Maroubra after a series of dramatic surf rescues by members of the Pioneer camp. On Sunday 27 October four men had narrow escapes after being carried out in the rip alongside the rocks at South Maroubra. Then a near tragedy occurred the following Sunday when five people, including four women, were swept out and rescued by members of the Pioneer camp. These rescues precipitated the formation of a lifeline brigade which quickly took the name South Maroubra Surf Club.

Distinguished founders. A woolbuyer and later Lord Mayor of Sydney, Ernest Samuel Marks, after whom Sydney's E.S. Marks Athletic Field was named, was a treasurer and a prime mover in the establishment of the club. As the minutes describe it, the honour of captain of the lifeline brigade went to Norman Martin, a professional Rugby referee who umpired

matches in Sydney's first grade and international matches. Ernest Baker, brother of Harold Baker and of entrepreneur 'Snowy' Baker, became vice-captain. Others in the lifeline brigade included Fred Williams, one of the pioneering body surfers in Australia. As a youth he had defied officialdom in the Manly district to surf during daylight hours. Other founding personalities included medical student Courtenay Wiley, who became a doctor in 1909 and served in the First World War as a colonel and later was a Macquarie Street specialist. Another founder was Frank Underwood, secretary for many years of the NSW Sports Club in Sydney.

Surgeons act as club instructors. A further meeting at the beach was held on Sunday, 1 December 1907, when the lifeline group formally became 'South Maroubra Surf Club'. Dr Cedric Bowker addressed the meeting on the function of the lungs and the cause of symptoms of drowning. This was followed by a demonstration of resuscitation by Dr Cedric Bowker with Dr Herbert Maitland acting as the 'subject' or patient. Dr Maitland, later Sir Herbert Maitland, became a renowned specialist in surgery of the head and neck and was a lecturer at Sydney Hospital and the University of Sydney. At this time South Maroubra Surf Club founders, including Dr Cedric Bowker, Dr Herbert Maitland, Fred Williams, Norman Martin, and Harold Baker took a prominent public role in opposition to strict new surf bathing regulations proposed by local councils and the State Government. They were variously quoted in Sydney's newspapers on 14 and 15 of October 1907. The regulations, with an eye to improving decency, included new rules for new men's swimming costumes. They also regulated when and for how long beachgoers could surf and sunbath. A public outcry saw the more draconian changes thrown out. At this time in 1907 Sydney's surf clubs formed themselves into the Surf Bathing Association of NSW. Dr Cedric Bowker presided over a large meeting of South Maroubra Surf Club members at the Pioneer camp on 15 February, 1908, when he was re-elected president with vice-presidents being Dr Bowker's brother, Robert, Dr Jack Windeyer, Dr Herbert Maitland and Mr S. McGeechie. Another meeting was held at the NSW Sports Club on 24 February 1908 with Mr E.S. Marks in the chair. Among those present were Norman Martin, Fred Williams and Bert Tuck, a government printer and part-time sergeant of the Sydney Scottish Rifles. The meeting decided that South Maroubra's logo should be a diamond shaped device featuring the letters S.M.S.C. A code of rules was drafted.

Harold Baker club captain in 1908. South Maroubra Surf Club's first annual report came out in mid-October 1908 disclosing that the club had undergone a strong season and was in a healthy financial position many new members enrolled. Dr Cedric Bowker was re-elected president. The meeting also elected a young man who would become a legendary surf lifesaver as the new captain of South Maroubra Surf Club. He was Harold Baker, who became known nationally for his feats of great bravery in rescues. He was one of the early members of the Pioneer camp at South Maroubra. He became the Australian 100 yards swimming champion in 1907, captained Australia at Water Polo, played in three Rugby Union tests for Australia, was a national boxing and wrestling title holder.

Amalgamation with Maroubra club. In late November 1908 South Maroubra Surf Club, while performing strongly and successfully, suddenly disappeared as an entity. The club had been obliged by the Surf Bathers' Association to amalgamate with Maroubra Surf Club in late 1908 when the Association decreed that there should be only one surf club at each beach. Harold Baker would go on to become the Maroubra Surf Club captain for two seasons - 1908-1909 and 1909-1910. A book published by Randwick Municipal Council in 1909 titled 'Randwick, 1859-1909', compiled by D.M. Cooper, said: "Eventually a consolidation was effected and now one club, with about 90 members, safeguards the bathers disporting in healthy abandon. Four reels are at their disposal; a club room too is being erected near the beach." By late 1910 no less than thirteen of the founder members of the former South Maroubra Surf Club had become office bearers in the amalgamated Maroubra Surf Club.

Killed at Gallipoli. As a footnote, a South Maroubra committeeman and beach competitor in 1907, Albert Victor Tuck, known as Bert, a government printer, aged thirty three of Randwick, was in the 4th Battalion AIF, D company, which landed at Gallipoli on April 25, 1914. The following day, Sergeant Tuck was leading his men in a bayonet charge and was killed. His cousin Private Percy Tuck, who buried him, was killed five days later.

Efforts towards a new club at South Maroubra. In February 1929 Randwick Municipal Council met to consider a proposal to re-establish a new club at South Maroubra. The backers of the proposal, including Thomas Mutch, former NSW Minister for Education, said Maroubra beach was attracting 30,000 people on summer days and was too large for one club. The president of Maroubra Surf Club, Randwick alderman Tom Wild, said there was not even road access to South Maroubra. On 26 February Randwick Council decided that there was no necessity for the formation of a second surf club at the beach.

1959 formation of existing South Maroubra Surf Life Saving Club. Thirty years later in 1959 another group put forward a proposal to establish South Maroubra Surf Life Saving Club and this time the proposal had the support of Maroubra Surf Club and Randwick aldermen. The foundation meeting took place at Malabar Surf Club on 31 May 1959 convened by Ric McKeon and chaired by Alderman Bill Lucas. Alderman Charlie Molloy, of Randwick Council, said bushland behind South Maroubra was being opened up for housing and a new club was needed. The formation committee comprised Alderman Lucas, Alderman Bill Haigh, Richard Carruthers, Brian Chenhall, Percy McKeon, Fred McKeon, Ric McKeon, Jack Anderson, Les Samuelson and Dick Hall. A key motivation for the move was worsening sewage pollution at Malabar from the Sydney Water Board's sewage treatment plant on the northern shore of the long, narrow bay. As early as 1953 Randwick Council's health department had termed the pollution, 'a menace to health'. Malabar Surf Life Saving Club records in 1959 said the pollution was severely affecting water quality and swimmers were avoiding the beach.

From ten to fibro clubhouse in 1959. At first members a tent on the sand dunes at South Maroubra for changing purposes, and then go on patrol. The first annual general meeting of the new club on 6 September 1959 reported that the financial position was sound. Alderman Charlie Molloy was patron and Alderman Bill Lucas president. Ric McKeon was the first club captain, Brian Chenhall, later boat captain, was the first honorary secretary, and Kevin Quinn was the foundation treasurer. A small fibro and timber building, measuring some ten metres by ten metres, was the first substantial clubhouse at South Maroubra built at the end of the first season and situated on the sand dunes just south east of today's existing building. The club mounted regular patrols. In the first season a new surfboat was donated by real estate magnate L.J. Hooker. Ron McKeon became South Maroubra's first placegetter of a surf title, coming second in the Metropolitan Junior Surf Championship. Then on Sunday 27 March 1960, the club conducted its first surf carnival for the Molloy Shield. The McKeon brothers dominated the first surf races. During the first winter members kept together by establishing the South Maroubra Dolphins Winter Swimming Club and taking part in a Sydney branch surf clubs' football competition. Maroubra Rotary Club donated the club's second surfboat, 'The Spirit of Rotary', in the second season. The club's junior boat crew was placed second in the Australian surf titles held in Tasmania during the 1961-62 season. Of the original members of the 1959 club, available records showed that five of the originals members were still members of South Maroubra Surf Life Saving Club

years later. They were Ric McKeon, Richard Carruthers, John Ludlow, Graham (Lou) Armstrong and Tony Brown.

Members help shark victim. A group of South Maroubra members attended the Australian surf championships at Moana in South Australia in March 1961. Afterwards the club's vice-captain John Ludlow and vice boat captain Ken 'Spud' Murphy began driving home via the coast. When they arrived at Warrnambool in Victoria some of the local surf club members were taking part in a swim around a buoy in the bay. John and Ken were at Lady Bay, Warrnambool, when a local club member, Ken Smith, twenty one, was attacked by a shark and brought to the beach on a skiff, as John recalled: "Spud and I waded into water with others to help carry him up the beach. Fortunately, the shark victim was a very big and heavy set man for the shark had attacked him from the side in the stomach, hip and buttocks areas where he had plenty of flesh. We carried him out of the water and up onto shore. Something I will never forget as I walked beside him was carrying his intestines in the palms of my hands. They marvellously put him back together at the Warrnambool hospital and he survived."

Vandalism problems. Because of the remoteness of South Maroubra, vandalism soon became a major problem. The clubhouse was broken into repeatedly and equipment smashed. In July 1961 vandals fired bullets through the clubhouse, smashing windows and light fittings. They even broke the end off the club's surfboat and torched it on the sand. In 1962 a boatshed was added to the clubhouse and a kiosk opened. Club members built and sealed a road from Fitzgerald Avenue to the clubhouse. The lagoon behind the club initially was used for training by the club's board and ski riders, but Council began to reclaim it in for parkland. Year four of the club in the 1962-1963 season saw a fenced enclosure with a concrete base, known as the stockade, added to the clubhouse which became the scene for social and fund-raising functions. Housing in the large estate behind the beach continued to expand, adding to the growing numbers of beachgoers. Randwick Council constructed public toilets and change rooms near the club and the club's funds were boosted by cars parking fees.

Shark between the flags. Part of the club's folklore occurred on a hot Sunday afternoon on 3 March 1963. Boat captain Brian Chenhall and chief instructor Frank Gidley were paddling a double ski beyond the break when they decided to dive in to cool off. Splashing about they spotted a shark approaching. Chenhall jumped back on the ski. Gidley tried, but fell back in

the water. Soon the shark alarm was wailing as the shark cruised in between the flags. Bathers fled the surf just ahead of the two-and-a half metre visitor. Club captain Ross Milne came racing down from the clubhouse brandishing the club's rusty shark spear. He and a junior Peter Barron stabbed and battered the shark before dragging it on to the sand. The club's patrols rescued 158 swimmers that season.

Surfboard injury issues. Around this time, before surfboard leg ropes, the number of injuries to surf swimmers increased when Malibu boards came loose between the flags. South Maroubra Surf Club precipitated meetings with Randwick Council with the startling result that the Council moved to locate all surfboard riders to South Maroubra. Hasty negotiations followed. Clearer guidelines for all were issued. All patrol captains were made honorary beach inspectors. Injuries from boards though continued.

Juniors role in mass rescues. Boxing Day 1963 saw a number of mass rescues at South Maroubra. Between 8 am and 10.30am the patrol had pulled more than twenty five people from the surf. South Maroubra beltmen at one stage rescued ten people swept about 200 metres out in the rip alongside the rocks. Both ends of Maroubra beach were closed during the morning but by mid-afternoon South Maroubra was re-opened and ten more people were swept out. The Boxing Day mass rescues later were recorded in the club's annual report: "...our patrol members, in particular our juniors, put South Maroubra on the map in the way they handled a frantic morning of rescues by surf reel and individual effort."

Beginnings a new clubhouse. The 1964-65 season saw John Dynan replace Bill Lucas as club president. A new clubhouse was needed and it became one of John Dynan's priorities. Fund raising was in top gear, but behind the scenes John Dynan was quietly working at a higher level, setting the complex financial, administrative and political groundwork for a building to be proud of. By now the old swamp had been filled in to become the broad parkland called Byrne Reserve behind the club. While new members continued to join, many were young and inexperienced. Club captain Ron Firkin reported that he had only thirty experienced active members for patrols. In the 1965-1966 annual report, secretary Dave Duffy reported that the fibro clubhouse had been broken into on three occasions and extensive damage caused. John Dynan in his annual report said it was imperative that plans for the construction of a brick clubhouse be pushed ahead.

South Maroubra Nippers established. The season saw the start of the Nipper Club for boys under twelve years. John Dynan and Bruce Rutherford played a strong role in the Nippers' formation and John became vice president of the new Juvenile Surf Life Saving Association in Sydney. The Nippers held races on Sundays. By 1968 the South Maroubra Nippers would be administered by their own committee with Bruce Rutherford the first president and Joyce Harris the first honorary secretary.

Olympians Dennis Green and Barry Stuart. Surf Ski champions and Olympic kayak medallists Dennis Green and Barry Stuart had joined South Maroubra with Dennis winning the Australian single ski title at the national championships at Perth for South Maroubra with Dennis and Barry teaming to finish close second in the double ski title the same day. The Stuart and Green pair also picked seven different carnival wins in the 1966-67 season and won the national double ski title at the Aussies in South Australia., among numerous other wins. Formerly from the Maroubra club, Green and Stuart were an amazing paddling duo. Dennis Green competed in five Olympic Games in his kayak in Melbourne in 1956, while Barry Stuart competed in four Olympic Games.

Two clubs combine for day of mass rescues. Events of Sunday 18 December 1966 became another day of mass rescues. South Maroubra's morning patrol arrived to witness dangerous surf conditions with beachgoers arriving in droves to escape the heat. After a number of rescues, the flags at South Maroubra were crossed and the southern end remained closed for the rest of the day. The Maroubra patrol up north, led by Barry Rodgers, was experiencing the same hazardous conditions with collapsing sandbanks. At South Maroubra's instigation, the two club's patrols combined to guard one central flagged area towards the centre of the beach. South Maroubra patrolled the southern portion of the flagged area, while Maroubra's patrol guarded the northern side. Barry Rodgers later told the press: "We were extremely lucky that the afternoon patrol was just coming on and that South Maroubra had closed their section of the beach about half an hour earlier. Otherwise we wouldn't have had anywhere near enough men to cope." It was a hectic afternoon. Boards, skis and boats patrolled offshore. Rescues continued throughout the afternoon and there were many close calls. A girl aged thirteen, rescued by South Maroubra's Ken Arthur, required mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The two clubs' combined rescues amounted to sixty eight on that memorable day.

Era of the new clubhouse. South Maroubra's ninth year in the 1967-1968 season saw the commencement of the first stage of the new clubhouse. The club's preliminary estimates blew out considerably. When planning started, the target cost was \$23,000. But the club managed to raise \$28,000 and during 1969 \$54,000 had been spent. Many donations came from the building trades, the Maroubra Seals Club and Randwick Council. Club members took part in many fund raisers, including a 'walkathon', a doorknock in Parramatta and a 'buy a brick' scheme. The clubhouse, designed by Finn & McKinley, was primarily a concrete and brick two-storey structure with a flat concrete roof reached by a spiral staircase. A large barbecue area was located on the north east aspect. The amenities were unsurpassed for a club of that era. The club committee reduced costs by building the new clubhouse themselves, employing a foreman, Bill Dihm. The building committee organised sub-contractors. The 1967-1968 annual report noted said that there was no doubt that without the devotion and energy of building committee secretary Paul Duffy and president John Dynan the new building would not have started for a further few years. The clubhouse was opened in 1969 by MLA Bill Haigh and president John Dynan before a large crowd of guests and members. House captain in 1969-1970, Paul White, called the new clubhouse the best and most modern surf clubhouse in Australia.

Beachfront rehabilitation. The club had been determined that the new clubhouse would never be a cause of erosion. As architect Ken Finn said at the time, most Sydney beaches were already a tragedy, spoilt by indiscriminate development. Finn knew South Maroubra was one of the few beachfronts around Sydney where an experiment in rehabilitation could be tried so the building would remain unobtrusive in a recreated natural environment. In a joint \$50,000 project Paul Duffy, later a life member, liaised closely with experts from the University of New South Wales, the NSW Soil Conservation Service and Randwick Council to ensure that the sand dunes would be rehabilitated, along with fenced walkways to the beach, over the whole of the South Maroubra beachfront. The results can be seen today.

Women in the surf club. On 9 August 1968 the club's first ladies auxiliary was formed. Maureen Murphy was president, Jan Milne honorary secretary, Rhonda Mason treasurer with committee members Meryl Ludlow, Lyn Hammond, Maureen Jollow, Gay Wilkinson, Leonie Jamieson and Diane Pentecost. The women liaised closely with the surf club management committee and for a time organised their own beach and water events on

Sundays during summer. Later, in the 1980s, South Maroubra was among the first clubs in Australia to admit women as members.

South Maroubra instigates anti-pollution campaign. Gradually sewage pollution from the Malabar treatment plant began to seriously impact on Maroubra beach. Increasingly beachgoers through the 'sixties and into the 'seventies experienced greasy sewage blobs washed up on the beach. South Maroubra Surf Club, concerned about dwindling beach crowds and club membership, was instrumental in calling for action. Senior club officials of South Maroubra Surf Club took an active part seeking government intervention. A public meeting was held at Maroubra Surf Club and an overflow crowd of 350 expressed their anger. According to the club's annual report in 1970, the NSW Government soon announced an initial \$17-million expenditure on treatment plants, but the club stated that funds were required "...for the construction of two-mile long underwater effluent outlets to take the filth away from our beaches to sea." By March 1971 the Sydney Water Board authorised a study the feasibility of constructing the underwater sewage outfalls. In the meantime the worsening effects of the sewage outfall forced the Malabar club to close in 1973. The feasibility study was presented in 1976. Eventually, a drilling rig appeared at sea off South Maroubra in 1984 signalling the start of a \$310-million project covering three ocean outfalls including Malabar. The submarine outfalls were operational by September 1990 and there was an immediate improvement in water quality. The club noted big crowds flocking to South Maroubra in the summer of 1990-1991. While there was a vast improvement, researchers questioned why industry was allowed to continue using the sewers to dispose of toxic waste. As life member Ken Arthur has said: "I think many of us learnt a lot about what is possible to achieve if you stand up for what you believe in and get community support behind you." 1009 rescues in first ten years.

In the ten years from 1959 to 1969 a great achievement was the recorded 1009 surf rescues at South Maroubra with no loss of life.

Among those who contributed to this history of the club from 1907 to the early 1970s were Bob Wurth, John Ludlow, Ross Milne, Ken Arthur and members of the SMOFs. Further history of the club from the 1970s onwards will appear on this website in the new year. More

details of South Maroubra Surf Club 1907-1908 can be found in the small book, Origins of a Surf Club, in the Bowen Library and other libraries of Randwick City Council.

Yvette: Please note that the club of 1907-1908 should be referred to as "South Maroubra Surf Club" not "South Maroubra Surf Life Saving Club".