

## From the archives of South Maroubra Surf Club

### Part 1. The beginnings, 1907-1908.



By Bob Wurth (1962).

South Maroubra Surf Club has a proud history as one of the oldest surf lifesaving clubs in Australia established seven years before the outbreak of World War One. The club, bearing the name 'South Maroubra Surf Club', was founded in 1907, the same year as the foundation of Bondi Surf Bathers' Lifesaving Club and a number of other pioneering surf clubs. Indeed the large group of beachgoers who gathered at the southern end of Maroubra beach called their retreat, 'The Pioneer Camp'. Some also called it the 'Doctors' Camp', owing to the number of medicos in the group.




*These gents above are the twenty office holders of South Maroubra Surf Club in the 1907-1908 surfing season. Surf lifesaving in Sydney was in its infancy. The club had its beginnings from those in what was called 'the doctors' camp' or 'the pioneer camp' at South Maroubra. After a string of hazardous surf rescues at remote South Maroubra in 1907 it became clear that a lifesaving squad or club was urgently required. Meetings were called and more than 80 members signed up at the inception of what was formally called 'South Maroubra Surf Club'. The lifesaver members included a number of young doctors and medical specialists. The club president, Dr Cedric Bowker, a prominent Sydney gynaecologist, is pictured in the centre back row and in his car (right). Harold Baker, the young fellow second from right back row, was elected as the club's second captain at the annual meeting of the club in October 1908. Young Baker was a highly skilled surfer who performed numerous really difficult rescues. When South Maroubra Surf Club was forced to amalgamate with the Maroubra Surf Club after the first two years, Harold Baker also became captain of the amalgamated northern club. The full details of the original club can be found in the booklet Origins of*

a Surf Club published in 2014 over 56 pages. The original documentation is located in Sydney's Mitchell Library.

Below is 'surf bathing' report in the Evening News in Sydney published on 13 October 1908, the second season of the original club. Note the number of medicos in senior positions. Also mentioned towards the end of the article is a club committeeman listed as 'A.Tuck'. Sergeant Albert Tuck, known as Bert, had been a keen club member. In 1915 he landed at Gallipoli, Anzac Cove, on 25 April and was killed the following day during a bayonet charge against the Turks. Surf club member Gary Gavegan in recent years laid a wreath at Bert Tuck's gravesite at Gallipoli.

**SURF BATHING.**

The first annual report of the South Maroubra Surf Club discloses the fact that a good number of members were enrolled, and a good financial year was gone through, the club being able to purchase life line, alarm bell, and other gear, and yet finish with a credit balance of 10s 2d. This season it is intended to affiliate with the Surf Association, and if possible have instruction to members on the beach and elsewhere. The election of officers for the season was as follows:—President, Dr. C. Bowker; vice-presidents, Dr. S. Bowker, Dr. H. Maitland, Dr. Windeyer, Mr. S. M'Geebie, Mr. E. S. Marks, Mr. G. King, Mr. G. Stainlay, Mr. S. B. Kingdon, Mr. H. W. Millham, Mr. F. T. Bell; captain, Mr. H. Baker; vice-captain, Mr. R. Talbot; hon. medical officers, Dr. C. Bowker and Dr. Windeyer; committee, Messrs. Bourke, E. Rice, N. Martin, A. Tuck, A. Hannington, T. Leek, S. Athey, J. Thompson, A. Williams; hon. treasurer, A. Schweickher; joint secretaries, Messrs. White and Brook.



Looking back to 1962, as a cadet member and the club's 'apprentice' publicity officer, I wrote and inserted brief competition details from the Sunday surf and beach results in the local throwaway local newspapers in the eastern suburbs. It was easy for the then 14-year-old to graduate to writing the occasional short news item, usually about surf rescues, which were much more exciting than reporting the mundane Sunday swimming and beach events, at which I rarely excelled anyhow. As time went on the race results were placed at the end of stories and then they just sort of petered out altogether. Instead there were many exciting tales in the local newspapers of daring rescues, bothersome sharks, glass on the beach, vandals smashing our fibro clubhouse and surfboat prangs, of which we had many.

At school I had loved writing essays – the only subject in which I excelled. It would lead to a career in journalism that would take me around the world as a foreign correspondent. It was the direct result in the early 1960s of being asked to file those Sunday morning swimming results for the local papers.

By chance around 1962 I found myself working on a story for the local papers that was utterly intriguing. I had stumbled on to a fleeting reference of a 'South Maroubra Surf Club' of 1907. When I mentioned it to seniors at the club, they just shook their heads, knowing nothing about it. But that first discovery sent me on a rather long and eventually fruitful hunt for information. But the seniors in the South Maroubra club that was founded in 1959 were sceptics. It was almost as though the discovery of an earlier South Maroubra surf club would undermine the significant efforts that they

had gone through from 1959 to establish the surf club at a trying beach under difficult conditions. So from 1962 I had begun to do some serious searching in local libraries and with the help of a series of appeals for more information in the local weekly newspapers, The Messenger, now defunct, and the Southern News, as it was then called.



It was a great pity that as a boy I hadn't ventured into the Mitchell Library in Macquarie Street where the original South Maroubra records actually existed and still exist today. Ernest S. Marks, (pictured), champion athlete, sports administrator and later Lord Mayor of Sydney, had ensured that the South Maroubra story was permanently anchored in the Mitchell Library, which is one of the great libraries of the world with a history dating back to 1826. The South Maroubra files are available for perusal by interested parties even today, provided white gloves are worn, care is taken and talk is reduced to a whisper.

Initial reaction to a public call in the early sixties for information on the old club was encouraging. A number of older residents came forward to say 'Yes, there certainly was a South Maroubra Surf Club' back in the early 1900s. A likeable elderly gent, V.H. Cohen, of Coogee, showed me a copy of a magazine entitled 'Surf in Australia' published in 1936 by the Surf Bathing Association of NSW.



The magazine contained reminiscences by Fred Thorpe (pictured) the first president of Maroubra Surf Club at the northern end of the beach. He wrote: "Our little club (Maroubra) was at the northern end, but in 1907 another club was formed at the southern end of the beach. This club had some fine swimmers and we soon came together and amalgamated." Fred Thorpe named the president of South Maroubra Surf Club as Dr Cedric Bowker, the leading Sydney gynaecologist, whose pastimes were swimming, surfing, fishing and motoring. There were a number of other well-known specialists and medical men in that first club, including Dr, later Sir, Herbert Maitland and Dr, later Professor, Jack Windeyer and Cedric Bowker's brother, Dr Robert Steer Bowker.

The southern end of the beach in those days could be every bit as dangerous as it can be today. But in the early years there were no formal lifesaving arrangements. However, a number of youths and men who gathered at remote South Maroubra during the warmer months to camp, surf and fish off the rocks made many rescues. Many of them were members of the East Sydney Amateur Swimming Club who also swam at Woolloomooloo. They joined the 'Doctors' camp'. As Maroubra beach itself was quite remote in the early 1900s, the habitués often slept in rough bush camps at South Maroubra near the rocks. They had plenty of fish to eat and they carted their own water and beer. Surfing in the nude was not unknown until one fellow was arrested and fined by a police constable at South Maroubra. He protested that he had been swimming in the altogether for the last 30 years. The magistrate was not impressed.

Surfers were getting into trouble at the southern end of the beach from the early years. South Maroubra was remote and initially there were no lifesaving facilities whatsoever. Sydney's Evening News of Monday 31 December 1906 carried a story headed '*Bathers Caught in Undertow*'. The story read in part: "Several narrow escapes from drowning occurred yesterday at Maroubra, owing to an unusual and strong undertow at the southern end of the beach – due to the north-west wind that prevailed. Shortly before one o'clock a young man of about 19 or 20 was seen to be in difficulties.



Norman Martin (pictured) and Herbert Mitchell, prominent members of the East Sydney Amateur Swimming Club after ten minutes battling, with two others, swam out to his assistance, but so strong was the current that it took the rescuers all their time to keep themselves afloat, and three of them had to return, leaving Mitchell to bring the drowning man in, which he succeeded in doing." There was another rescue of a young man that day shortly afterwards and The Evening News on the Monday said both rescuer and patient had reached the beach exhausted. There were about 500 people present to watch the rescue and excitement ran high, according to the Evening News. Almost a year later Norman Martin went on to become the first club captain of the lifeline brigade (like a squad or patrol) with the formal establishment of the new 'South Maroubra Surf Club' occurring at a meeting on 24 November 1907. Martin was a well-known first grade Rugby referee who umpired international matches.

In 1909 Randwick Municipal Council produced a commemorative book entitled 'Randwick 1859 to 1909'. A section on Maroubra beach pointed out that there were two surf clubs on Maroubra beach – Maroubra and South Maroubra. The commemorative book said: '...eventually, a consolidation was effected and now there is one club with about 90 members – lifeguards and bathers disporting themselves in healthy abandon.'

In 1906 the North Maroubra Life Line Club had been the forerunner of the present Maroubra Surf Life Saving Club, which came shortly before South Maroubra Surf Club's formal establishment. One of the most renowned surf lifesavers in Australia, Harold Baker, became captain of South Maroubra Surf Club prior to joining Maroubra Surf Club in late 1908 when the two clubs were forced by Sydney surf lifesaving authorities to amalgamate into one club. The forced amalgamation on Maroubra beach was strange, given the length of Maroubra beach, its surfing conditions and the new requirement for the amalgamated northern club to keep a watch on swimmers at the far southern end of the beach.

The author C. Bede Maxwell, in her book *Surf, Australians Against the Sea* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1949, page 169), chronicled the amalgamation of the two clubs at Maroubra beach. She wrote: "For many years it was the policy of local governing bodies and of the Surf Life Saving Association to recognise only one club in beach area. Yet there was a precedent for the divided control of a large beach, for at the very time that the association came into existence two Manly clubs and two Bondi clubs were represented at the inaugural meeting of October 1907."



Certainly some order in those early lifesaving groups needed to be established. In the early years of the 1900s Coogee beach had about five or six different groups which performed lifesaving duties at the beach and inevitably consolidation and organisation was needed. But a lengthy beach like Maroubra should never have had its two clubs, one at either end, forced to come together and amalgamate. The early South Maroubra boffins should have dug in their toes like the duel clubs which did so and refused to be amalgamated at Bondi and Manly beaches.

The election of South Maroubra office bearers for the season included President Dr Cedric Bowker, a leading Sydney gynaecologist; vice presidents, Dr Robert Steer, Bowker, Dr Herbert Maitland (later Sir), Dr Jack Windeyer, S. McGeechie, Ernest S. Marks, G. King, G. Stainlay, S.B. Kingdon, H. W. Millham, F. T. Bell and the club captain, the young Harold Baker. Within a month of the amalgamation of both surf clubs in November 1908, Harold Baker, accustomed to hauling in swimmers in difficulty at South Maroubra, performed some outstanding rescues with the new, expanded Maroubra Surf Club. Harold Baker was a tall, well-built youth when he began surfing with the 'doctors' group'. Even then he had an amazing record as a swimmer and surfer.

In 1963 the detail of the doctors' group and the actual formation of the early South Maroubra Surf Club were very short of detail. So the hunt was on for more information and thanks to The Messenger newspaper other older residents of the Maroubra area soon came forward and my incomplete information duly was published in the local paper.



The 1962-63 annual report the club's then secretary, David Duffy, (pictured), recorded the early work on the club's history: "Later in the season Robert set about to find the early history and activities of South Maroubra beach and through a series of articles in the local newspaper he collected some very interesting information from interested readers." But the task would take another 50 years or so to accurately document the early history.

As a 15-year-old I haltingly presented my initial findings to the surf club's management committee in our little fibro clubhouse one cold winter's night. To get there you had to stumble along a rough dirt track around the big freshwater swamp, which is now Byrne Reserve. The swamp emanated a creepy cacophony of night noises. The only light was on a pole outside the little fibro clubhouse. Alderman Bill Lucas, our hard-working president, was in the chair. As by far the youngest committeeman in the room, I nervously presented the responses from various people who had given some kind of evidence of the earlier South Maroubra Surf Club. To add insult to injury (I hadn't realised that I was offending the original Fifty Niners), I then had the audacity to suggest that the club's management committee might endorse my findings about the existence of our earlier surf club in 1907-08. The reaction was unanimous. The committee wouldn't have a bar of it and indeed it wanted nothing to do with 'someone else being the first lifesavers at South Maroubra' apart from the Fifty Niners, although most of them belatedly were a tad sympathetic.



After making my presentation of the various old residents who had known about the earlier club, I sat down thinking I had done my best as some of the evidence was compelling. But I surprised to discover that the club captain Ross Milne (pictured) and other foundation members of the 1959 surf club were completely unimpressed. There was nothing at South Maroubra when they had arrived but sandhills, a huge swamp and a beach that could be dangerous. The first patrol arrived at the beach in 1959 and had battled against the odds and no-one else should be given credit for establishing the first surf club at South Maroubra. Ross Milne, who was an outstanding club captain and a decent bloke, made a classic statement that I have never forgotten about what he thought of the original 1907 founders: *"They probably were all just a bunch of drunks!"* he declared with some emotion. This might have inferred that the Fifty-Niners were strict teetotallers, which would not be an entirely accurate portrayal of the truth.



***The early battles in founding South Maroubra Surf Club from 1959 will be examined in Part Two.***