

The history of Shannon Reserve, Surry Hills



John W. Ross

Cover photograph:

Shannon Reserve Playground (City of Sydney)



Collins Street mosaics

“The Kindergarten Union provides eighteen free kindergartens and playgrounds for poor children...whose only playground is the street with all its dangers”.

(*Truth*, 6 August 1933).

The chief aim of the Parks and Playgrounds Movement:

“That every child shall have a chance to play and every citizen the opportunity for recreation” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 September 1931).

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Foreword

Much of the inner Sydney suburb of Surry Hills was included in the 25-acre Riley Estate, which was divided between the seven heirs in 1845 after a long legal process that followed the death of Edward Riley in 1825. The block that is now Shannon Reserve was part of the land allocated to George Riley, but this was transferred to his creditor Thomas Burdekin to pay George's debts.

The Burdekin family was in no hurry to develop the land, and it was not until the 1870s that shops and livery stables were built at the Foveaux Street end. In the 1880s, Samuel Maisey established a wood and coal business at the Collins Street end, which operated until the 1920s. By the 1930s, a car-wrecking business had taken over the wood yard. In a sign of the changing times, horses were superseded by automobiles.

A Workmen's Institute was planned for the block just before World War I, but it was never built, leaving the land vacant for several years. In the 1930s, this presented an opportunity for the newly formed Parks and Playgrounds Movement to suggest that the Sydney Council take over the land from the State Government and turn it into a recreational reserve.

This idea was adopted and Shannon Reserve was opened in 1939. However, World War II interrupted its development as a park and playground, and the threat of attack resulted in air raid shelters being installed in much of the reserve. After the war, the defensive structures were removed, and Shannon Reserve was returned to recreational use.

A monthly flea market was established by the local Neighbourhood Centre in 1981, and the Surry Hills Fiesta (later Festival) was held there each year until it outgrew the space available in 2006 and was moved to the larger Prince Alfred Park. The reserve received a major upgrade in the 1990s to create its present form, and the playground was rejuvenated in 2020.

Shannon Reserve owes its existence to a growing awareness in the early twentieth century of the need for more green spaces in urban areas, for exercise and recreation. The historian Charles Bean was the main force behind the movement to identify and recommend land for this purpose. The park remains a vibrant playground for the local children, a meeting place for the residents and the home of a popular market.

John W. Ross
Surry Hills, Sydney
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email: rossjw@ozemail.com.au

Early settlement history

Acknowledgement of country

The author acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora nation upon whose ancestral lands Surry Hills is now located. He would also like to pay respect to the Elders both past, present and emerging, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands.

The Riley Estate

The area that became Shannon Reserve was part of the Riley Estate, which covered a significant part of Surry Hills in the early nineteenth century. Edward Riley (1784-1825) was born in London to George Riley Senior, a well-educated bookseller, and Margaret Raby. He first went to Calcutta to work as a colonial trader. In 1805, he married Ann Moran, who had three sons and a daughter. He shipped all kinds of produce to China and the Australian colonies.

His elder brother Alexander had been in New South Wales since 1804, and Edward regularly shipped cargoes of rum, clothing and food to his brother's company. His fortunes fluctuated in Calcutta, and he acquired a taste for extravagant living. However, he was not a good businessman and relied on his older brother's business advice. His wife died in 1810, throwing him into deep bouts of depression. His brother urged him to come out to New South Wales to settle. He had already visited it several times. At one point he rallied, married Ann Wilkinson in Calcutta in 1813, then they moved to Sydney in 1816 to live¹.

He quickly became a leading citizen of the colony. Governor Lachlan Macquarie gave him a grant of land and made him a magistrate, and by 1818 he was a director of the Bank of New South Wales². He bought Ultimo House, the largest house in the colony, which once belonged to surgeon John Harris³, and began to live the luxurious life of a British grandee that had been little known in New South Wales until then⁴.

From 1814, he started buying allotments in John Palmer's George Farm but only succeeded in buying about 25 of the original 70 acres, including Palmer's grand residence, Woolloomooloo House. His health deteriorated through the early 1820s, and his mood swings became more violent. He suffered badly from gout and became increasingly irritated at the limitations of colonial life. One night in February 1825, he retired to his room after dinner and shot himself with his shotgun. Despite his troubles, Edward Riley had great charm and honesty and was a devoted family man⁵.

Carving up the estate

After Edward Riley's death, there was considerable confusion about the validity of two conflicting wills, which resulted in an immense amount of litigation before his estate was settled. It proved to be of great value, despite the neglect of the land and buildings at Raby. Most of his properties had not been developed, including the land in Sydney⁶.

At the time of Riley's death in 1825, his oldest child was aged 19, and his tenth child was aged one. Three of the ten did not reach adulthood, so the estate involved seven heirs. Riley wanted his estate shared equally amongst his children, even the two daughters, but not until the youngest had reached her majority. Edward Riley died 21st February 1825, and Frances Elizabeth turned 21 on 21st August 1845. Edward Junior died in 1840, so his heirs had to be factored in.

The biggest stumbling block was the equal division among his heirs. As this meant dividing the land into seven portions of equal financial value, the Supreme Court appointed a Riley Estate Partition Board. The map of the Riley Estate shows that each heir was allocated a simple code⁷:

- A = James John Riley, born 1821
- B = Frances Elizabeth Riley, born 1824 married Charles Daniel O'Connell
- C = Alexander William Riley, born 1818
- D = George Riley, born 1808 (replaced by Thomas Burdekin)
- E = Executors of Edward Riley (Jnr), 1806-1840
- F = Charles D. Riley, born 1822
- G = Anna Sophia Riley, born 1816 married Robert Campbell (Colonial Treasurer).

On 8th October 1841, Chief Justice Sir James Dowling appointed four Commissioners to the Board, who would survey Edward Riley's Woolloomooloo and Surry Hills Estates. After exhaustive evaluations were made, the Commissioners declared each of the seven lots to be worth £97,274, valuing the will of Edward Riley at £681,000, which put him in the all-time top two hundred Australian estates. Once this value was determined and declared, lots were drawn of parcels of land of equal value⁸.



Figure 1 Riley Estate block D18 (City of Sydney Archives)

Collins Street was constructed during the division of the estate and was officially proclaimed a street in 1848⁹. The land occupied by Shannon Reserve was part of block D18, which was inherited by the second son, George. He accrued a lot of debt by living beyond his means while growing up, and asked Thomas Burdekin for a loan, which may not have been a wise move, given Burdekin's history of avid land-accumulation from his debtors.

When George defaulted on the payments by 1841, Burdekin applied to the New South Wales Supreme Court to replace George in the will, to which the court agreed. But Thomas Burdekin died in August 1844, and his son and heir Sydney was only five years old. So, his wife Mary Ann took over the management of the Burdekin Estate until Sydney reached adulthood¹⁰.

The Burdekin family

Thomas Burdekin (1801-1844), ironmonger, was one of Australia's early merchants, industrialists, politicians and financiers. He became very wealthy by acquiring land and through money lending and

came to hold influence in the colony's politics and society. He was born in Sheffield in Yorkshire and arrived in Sydney in July 1828 on the *Australia* as an assisted immigrant to establish a branch of his father's ironmongers Burdekin and Hawley in George Street.

He employed the young Henry Parkes in late 1839 or early 1840¹¹. In 1833 he married Mary Ann Bossley (1806-1889) in Sydney. He began his land acquisition in 1830 with the purchase of a William Street lot and by 1842 he owned property in Macquarie, College and York Streets, as well as vast tracts of land beyond the Nineteen Counties in the Hunter and New England regions (the Nineteen Counties were the limits where settlers were allowed to take up land in the colony of New South Wales due to the dangers of the wilderness beyond, but from 1836 they could pay £10 per annum for the right).

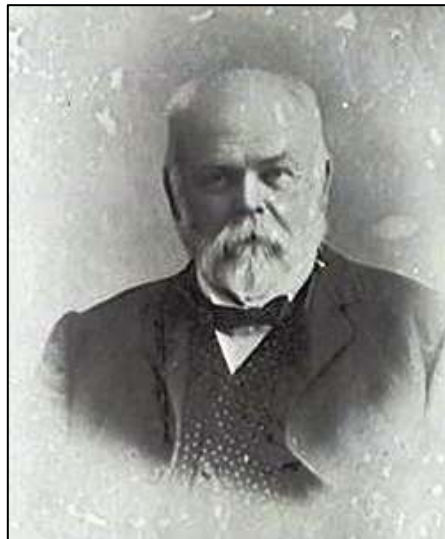


Figure 2 Sydney Burdekin (City of Sydney Archives)

He was able to acquire large amounts of real estate in the colony through his financing and money lending. By loaning money in return for security on property, he foreclosed and took ownership of many properties after owners defaulted on their debts. Many considered his money-lending practices were aggressive. In 1842, he foreclosed on Benjamin Singleton for £2,100 which gave him control of most of the land in the township of Singleton. This kind of aggressive lending and subsequent foreclosing made him deeply unpopular among borrowers and landowners¹².

Thomas Burdekin was a Sydney Councillor from October 1843 to February 1844. In 1844, he agreed to support explorer Ludwig Leichhardt's explorations into outback Queensland. After Burdekin's death in 1844, his wife Mary Ann continued this support, leading to Leichhardt's discovery of the major river he named the Burdekin River in honour of Thomas and Mary. This flowed into an area in Queensland to the south of Townsville known as the Shire of Burdekin.

Thomas Burdekin died in August 1844, leaving a large amount of real estate in Sydney and elsewhere to his family. His wife became the matriarch of the Burdekin family and managed much of the business affairs with her brother John Bossley. Bossley Park in Sydney is named after her. Patrick White based his 1957 novel *Voss* on the expeditions of Ludwig Leichhardt. In the novel, his wealthy sponsor is the Sydney merchant and draper Edmund Bonner, who is based on Burdekin. White depicts the character as a successful but somewhat coarse and materialistic colonial businessman.

Thomas Burdekin was the father of:

- Sydney Burdekin (1839-1899).
- Bossley Burdekin (1835-1882).
- Marshall Burdekin (1837-1886), barrister and politician.

Sydney Burdekin (1839-1899), politician, was born in Sydney. He became a solicitor's clerk but did not pursue a legal career and became a pastoralist, managing the many runs he and his mother held in northern New South Wales and Queensland. He was elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly as the member for Tamworth in 1880, then was defeated in 1882 after contesting South Sydney¹³. He was an active and prominent member of the free trade movement. After moving to Sydney, he was elected to the Sydney City Council in 1883, serving until 1898¹⁴.

In 1884 he was returned as a member of the Legislative Assembly via a by-election in East Sydney¹⁵. He was Lord Mayor of Sydney from 1890 to 1891. Always a man of public affairs, he was a director of Sydney Hospital in 1878-99 and presided over the royal commission on the city and suburban railways in 1890-91. This body recommended separate terminals for city and country trains and led to the discussions that resulted in the extension of the railway to a new Central Station by 1906. On his death, tributes to his benevolence and affability abounded.

Marshall Burdekin (1837-1886) was born in Sydney. After receiving a Master of Arts at Sydney University, he was called to the bar in 1859. He had inherited a large fortune from his father in 1844. He was elected to the Legislative Assembly for Liverpool Plains at the 1863 by-election, transferring to the Williams electorate at the 1864-65 election.

In 1866, he was appointed Colonial Treasurer but was defeated at a ministerial by-election and held the post for less than a month. He lived mainly overseas from the late 1860s, falling seriously ill in America in 1876 and suffering from ill health until his death in England in 1886¹⁶. The Burdekin family retained ownership of the block that became Shannon Reserve until the State Government acquired it for a future Workmen's Institute.

First colonial occupation of the site

Early businesses in the block

The first colonial occupant of the area that is now Shannon Reserve was Samuel Lancett, who established a bakery in 1873 at 436 Crown Street on the corner of Foveaux Street¹⁷. In 1875, he was succeeded by the bootmaker Thomas England¹⁸. He died later the same year¹⁹ and was succeeded by the cutler Albert Bates²⁰.

In 1880, James Egan opened a grocery shop on the Foveaux Street corner, then known as 428 Crown Street²¹. By 1885, he had constructed livery stables next to the shop²² and continued to operate the stables until 1906²³. In 1882, Joseph Tait established a butcher's shop at 466 Crown Street on the corner of Collins Street²⁴ and the following year was joined by John Brown²⁵.

Coal and wood in the early colony

For most of human history, wood was the main fuel until the use of coal spread during the Industrial Revolution²⁶. In the late nineteenth century, Sydney had an almost insatiable appetite for firewood.

For a while, many parts of the colony were heavily forested and so provided a ready supply of fuel that could be transported to the metropolitan area via the expanding railway network.

For about twenty years from the late 1880s, woodcutting was an important source of employment for many people: the gangs of loggers toiling in the bush felling suitable trees for firewood and railway sleepers, the carters who hauled the wood to the mills in small drays and the mill operators who cut the wood into various lengths suited to the needs of the users. Common types of firewood were advertised as baker's wood, foot wood and two-foot wood²⁷.

The Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain in the eighteenth century, was based on the availability of coal to power steam engines. International trade expanded rapidly when coal-fed steam engines were built for the railways and steamships during the Victorian era. Coal was cheaper and much more efficient than wood as fuel in most steam engines.



Figure 3 Coal and wood merchant 1885 (*Protestant Standard*, 8 August 1885)

Coal was first discovered in New South Wales by shipwreck survivors in 1797 at Coalcliff, north of Wollongong. George Bass discovered coal soon afterwards in the cliffs of Newcastle²⁸. Coal exports first left Newcastle in 1799 after being mined by convicts. Shipments left for India, making coal the colony's first export commodity²⁹.

Coal mining in the Newcastle area was initially small-scale and used in domestic heating. By the early 1900s, coal had become integral to the local economy as it was used in railway locomotives, cutting logs in steam-powered sawmills and grinding wheat³⁰. Australian coal is either high-quality bituminous coal (black coal) or lower quality lignite (brown coal). Bituminous coal is used for both domestic power generation and is exported³¹.

Coal seams extend under Sydney, but the huge depth of these seams resulted in only very limited mining activity in the metropolitan area³². In the nineteenth century, coal was mainly carried to Sydney by sea. This was largely because the main railway lines from Sydney to the north and south

were not completed until the 1880s due to the significant amount of work required to carry these railways across the Hawkesbury and Georges Rivers.

The Maisey family

This section describes three generations of the Maisey family, referred to as Samuel Maisey I (1802-1880), Samuel Maisey II (1844-1898) and Samuel Maisey III (1871-1919).

Samuel Maisey I was born in London in 1802 and migrated to Sydney sometime after 1828³³. In 1836 he was working as a butcher³⁴. In 1843 Samuel Maisey I married Mary Ann Cork (1812-1899) who was born in London and arrived in the second migrant ship of women and girls in 1828³⁵. Samuel Maisey II was born in Sydney in 1844. In 1864, he married Amelia Budd (1846-1922), who was born in Lambeth, Surrey³⁶.

In 1882, Frank Clark³⁷ and Samuel Maisey II established a wood and coal yard at 464 Crown Street, next to the butcher's shop on the Collins Street corner and operated as fuel merchants³⁸, although Maisey seemed to be the sole operator from 1885³⁹. From 1912 Samuel Maisey II kept livery stables in Little Young Street, Redfern. He died in 1898 in his home at 24 Young Street Redfern, having handed the Crown Street yard over to his sons a few years earlier⁴⁰. After Samuel II's death, his sons Samuel III (1871-1919) and Arthur George (1873-1961) carried on the business of wood and coal merchants on behalf of their widowed mother⁴¹.



Figure 4 Cooper's used cars, 1930s (City of Sydney Archives)

Samuel Maisey III suffered from painful hernias for many years, and in March 1918 published a testimonial letter advertising the trusses sold by the hernia specialist Mr. Louis Brown. He wrote that he had been in chronic pain until trying these trusses⁴². However, his life of discomfort was eventually too much for him and in July 1919 he connected a rubber pipe to the gas jet in his dining room and gassed himself to death. The newspaper report, titled "Full Dress Rehearsal", mentioned that he was "fully dressed for the grim adventure"⁴³.

The coal and wood yard operated by the Maisey family closed in about 1922⁴⁴. Then from 1924, James E. Smalley operated a builder's yard on the site⁴⁵. This was taken over by Frederick Cooper in 1929, who operated a car wrecking business⁴⁶. The Cooper family continued to dismantle cars and run the adjacent shop until the whole block was taken over by the Sydney City Council in 1936 for conversion to a park⁴⁷. It was a sign of the times that horsepower in the early years of the twentieth century (such as James Egan's livery stable) was superseded by petrol power by the 1930s.

Crown Star No. 1 Picture Theatre

Early cinema in Sydney

Vaudeville and other forms of live theatre dominated popular entertainment throughout the nineteenth century. After the invention of the Cinematographe by the Lumiere brothers to capture moving images, the first films were shown in Sydney at the Tivoli Theatre in 1895. But the initial excitement faded by 1899 and was only revived when the British entrepreneurs Charles Spencer and T. J. West established production companies and permanent picture theatres by 1908 and proceeded to rejuvenate the fledgling industry.



Figure 5 Star Picture Company letterhead, 1912 (City of Sydney Archives)

Initially, it was expected that motion pictures would just be brief recordings of everyday events, but before long their narrative and dramatic potential was realised. By 1911, cinema was the most popular form of entertainment in Sydney, and several picture theatres were operating in the city and inner suburbs. Going out to see live theatre was always a special occasion, and the new picture theatres often tried to maintain this feeling with glamorous decorations and velvet curtains, showing the latest releases from the big American studios.

But in the poorer parts of Sydney such as Surry Hills, proprietors could initially only afford basic facilities such as open-air enclosures with simple bench seating, screening second and third release films. Despite this, going to the cinema became so popular that half the population attended regularly.

Crown Star Theatre No. 1

In May 1911, Augustus Lett of the Australia Photo Play Company applied to the City Council for permission to erect an open-air picture theatre on the block of land fronting Crown Street between Foveaux and Collins Streets. The main body of the theatre would seat 964 patrons, and two galleries would seat 250 each. The City Building Surveyor commented in a memo that the Council may decide not to approve further Picture Shows within the city. He mentioned two cases in Darlinghurst and

Camperdown where tents were erected over the whole area of the theatre, essentially forming a canvas and timber building, which he thought was undesirable⁴⁸.

While Council approval was being considered, an open-air picture theatre was erected by the Australia Photo Play Company in 1911 on a nearby block of land on Crown Street between Arthur and Rainford Streets. The was called Crown Star No. 2 Picture Theatre (presumably because it was meant to be the second theatre opened in that locality) and the one between Foveaux and Collins Streets was called Crown Star No. 1 Picture Theatre. The No. 2 theatre was smaller, with seating for 1,000 patrons⁴⁹.

George Maisey operated a wood and coal business at the Collins Street end of the block and a livery stable was located at the Foveaux Street end. So, the theatre must have been built in the undeveloped middle section of the block. It was intended as an overflow venue for its sister cinema down the road, despite being the larger venue. But things did not go well with the management of the overflow theatre. George Maisey sued the company directors Victor Teasdale and Frederick Ogden in October 1913 over non-payment of 200 shares in the company after the purchase of some picture show equipment that Maisey had sold to them.

The No. 1 theatre only operated for a few years, and the company went into voluntary liquidation in June 1914⁵⁰. The plant and materials were sold in February 1915⁵¹. The No. 2 theatre operated until 1925 when a fire caused considerable damage, and the building was eventually demolished in 1927.

Proposed Workmen's Institute

In 1914, the New South Wales Government resumed the block of land between Crown, Collins, Foveaux Streets and Richards Lane, paying Sydney Burdekin more than £10,000 in compensation. The plan was to build a Workmen's Institute on the land⁵².

Education was not compulsory in New South Wales until Henry Parkes introduced the *Public Instruction Act* in 1880, which required children to stay at school until age 14⁵³. Until then, many people grew up with little formal education, often due to economic constraints on poor families where children had to enter the workforce to help support the family.

Under these conditions, people reached adulthood only to find they were unprepared to advance their careers and felt the need for further education in basic skills such as arithmetic, mathematics, mechanics and English. This is apart from more general knowledge such as music, literature, history and geography.

In response to this need, Mechanics Institutes, Schools of Arts and Workmen's Institutes were established throughout the nineteenth century. They were usually started by wealthy philanthropists with a desire to improve the social, intellectual and moral lives of their fellow citizens.

Sydney Mechanics School of Arts

The first Mechanics Institute was set up in Scotland in 1821, and its aim was the intellectual improvement of its members through the diffusion of scientific and other useful knowledge and the cultivation of literature, science and art⁵⁴.

By the early 1830s, Sydney had come a long way from its origins as a penal settlement four decades earlier, with free settlers increasing in numbers. The Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts was established in 1833 to provide education for adults who lacked formal education as children and to promote life-long learning for all. It is the longest running School of Arts and the oldest continuous lending library in Australia.

Because the original role of such institutions was to provide education for adults, most of the Schools of Arts and Institutes had libraries attached, and the New South Wales Government provided grants for the purchase of books. But as colonial (and later State) Governments took greater responsibility for public education, most of these philanthropic organisations came to an end. This process was sped up when local councils also began to provide free public libraries.

The Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts still operates in Pitt Street as a centre for life-long learning and now houses the Tom Keneally Centre, the research collection of the author Thomas Keneally⁵⁵.

Workmen's Institutes in inner Sydney

From the 1860s, Workmen's Institutes opened in New South Wales to provide both education and entertainment for working class men. An early example of this type of organisation opened in Newcastle in 1865. It established a free library of English and colonial newspapers. Books and periodicals were donated by members and friends. A billiard room was furnished with bagatelle, chess boards and other means of recreation. Classes in mathematics, practical geometry and music

were conducted. The Institute's aims were the social, moral and intellectual improvement of the citizens of Newcastle⁵⁶.

The first Working Men's Institute in Sydney was formed in Balmain in 1865⁵⁷. The St. Silas Workmen's Institute was established in Alexandria in 1887⁵⁸, followed by others in Mortlake in 1888⁵⁹ and Newtown in 1899⁶⁰.

The Newtown Workmen's Institute was essentially a resurrection of the Newtown School of Arts, which operated until 1868. It was organised along the lines of the successful Institute in Balmain. In 1910, the members decided to change the name to the Newtown School of Arts, as it was felt that the objectives of the institute had been misunderstood. Many people thought its purpose was purely political and was connected with the Political Labour League. In fact, politics and religious subjects were forbidden. Its sole objects were the social, intellectual and moral improvement of its members⁶¹.



Figure 6 Newtown Workmen's Institute, 1909 (City of Sydney Archives)

The movement expanded in inner Sydney so that by 1903 there were Workmen's Institutes in Newtown, Balmain, Rozelle, Glebe, West Sydney (Pyrmont), Gipps (Dawes Point) and North Sydney⁶². Leichhardt followed in 1920⁶³ and an Eastern Suburbs Workmen's Institute in Paddington in 1912⁶⁴. Clearly, the movement was expanding in the early twentieth century.

Proposed Surry Hills Workmen's Institute

Like many institutions in colonial times, the Workmen's Institutes were often established by wealthy philanthropists and then financed by member subscriptions and fundraising events. It is not known who the benefactor was who persuaded the New South Wales Government to provide a parcel of land for a Workmen's Institute in Surry Hills, but in 1914 the Department of Public Works paid Sydney Burdekin more than £10,000 compensation for the block of land bounded by Foveaux, Crown and Collins Streets and Richard Lane⁶⁵.

Nothing happened for several years, and the block fell into some disuse. However, in 1920 the Surry Hills Workmen's Institute was in the news when its committee recommended building a stadium in

Hyde Park for a Wild West Show⁶⁶. The following year, the members were holding meetings at Sydney Town Hall⁶⁷.

Then in June 1923, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published an illustration of a proposed Workmen's Institute building in the resumed land. The *Herald's* detailed description of the building was of a graceful and imposing design (it was three stories high and took up the whole block). While its aim was to be educational and recreational, it would also house a new shopping centre and be "the rendezvous for lovers of moving pictures".



Figure 7 Surry Hills Workmen's Institute (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 June 1923)

The building would include classrooms, an imposing array of shops, with cantilever awnings, a picture theatre, a large assembly hall, a gymnasium, a billiard room and other appointments. Constructed on a vacant piece of land facing Crown Street, it would have a frontage of 300 feet extending from Foveaux to Collins Street.

Fourteen well-appointed shops would be on the ground floor, while on the first floor would be the rooms of the Institute. These would consist of millinery and dressmaking classrooms, and eleven rooms set aside for other classes to be determined by the trustees. On the first floor would be a picture theatre accommodating 500 people. A large assembly hall would be provided on the first floor, large enough for 500 people. On the second floor would be a gymnasium, a billiard room, and dressing rooms for both genders and other appointments.

The buildings, which included an arch over the main entrance, would be constructed of brick with sandstone dressings. The land was dedicated for this purpose by the State Government in September 1921. The cost of the building would be around £80,000. The buildings were expected to provide a good return on the outlay from the businesses on the ground floor⁶⁸.

However, nothing ever came of the grand building for workmen's education and recreation, and in June 1938 Colin Sinclair, the Minister for Lands, revoked the grant of the piece of land dedicated for a Workmen's Institute⁶⁹. In 1937, the Government had agreed to lease the land to Sydney Council to use the land as a park and playground⁷⁰. The revocation in 1938 was enacted to free up the land for this purpose.

Wirth Brothers' menagerie

A circus is a company of people who put on diverse entertainment shows that include clowns, acrobats, trained animals, trapeze artists, musicians, dancers, tightrope walkers, jugglers, magicians, and many other acts. The term circus also describes the performance that has followed various formats throughout its 250-year modern history.

The modern circus began to crystallise in London in the 1760s, when riders used to give open-air displays of trick horsemanship at Lambeth, south of the Thames. In time, some of these displays began to resemble the form we associate with the modern circus. The man credited as the father of the modern circus is Sergeant-Major Philip Astley (1742-1814), an English cavalry veteran. He performed in a circle, not in a straight line like his rivals, as he found it was easier to stay on the horse with a circular track.

American circuses were not much interested in travelling to Australia, but American innovations such as the Big Top and multiple rings were adopted into the style of Australian circuses. Until the middle of the twentieth century, travelling circuses were a major form of spectator entertainment and attracted huge attention wherever they arrived in a town or city.

But their popularity declined after World War II when television and other forms of entertainment arrived, and the public's tastes became more sophisticated. Then from the 1960s onwards, circuses attracted criticism from animal rights activists. Many circus troupes went out of business or were forced to merge with others. Despite this, a number of travelling circuses are still active around the world, ranging from small family enterprises to giant three-ringed extravaganzas⁷¹.

Wirth Brothers' Circus

The four Wirth brothers, John, Harry, Philip and George were the sons of the German-born brass musician Johannes Wirth. They joined Ashton's Circus as Wirth's Tourist Band in about 1881. They left in 1882 to set up their own troupe in Haymarket, initially with themselves as the only performers. From this time, Wirth Brothers' Circus grew so rapidly that by 1887 it was the largest in Australia⁷². After touring the world in the late nineteenth century, after 1900 the circus confined its operations to Australia.



Figure 8 Haymarket Hippodrome (Powerhouse Museum)

Wirth's Hippodrome in Haymarket was built for the circus by the Sydney Municipal Council at a cost of over £38,000 and leased to Wirth Brothers, opening in April 1916⁷³. It featured a mammoth concrete tank that would be used for spectacular displays and aquatic events⁷⁴. It was rebuilt in 1927 to become the Capitol Theatre⁷⁵.

Housing the menagerie

A perennial problem faced by the Wirth brothers was the housing of their menagerie of animals while the circus was in town. When they performed in large parks such as Prince Alfred Park in Surry Hills, there was plenty of space for the animals, but the Hippodrome in Haymarket had no such land available. So, the management had to find accommodation elsewhere for their travelling zoo, and it was always controversial.

The Wirth Brothers' season in Sydney usually ran for several weeks, starting around Easter. During the 1921 season, the animals were housed at Hyde Park Corner, on the corner of Liverpool and Elizabeth Streets. That year, there were seven lions, two leopards, four elephants and some monkeys in a large tent in the park. The City Council received several complaints from nearby residents about animals roaring at night and in the early morning.



Figure 9 Hyde Park Corner, 1916 (City of Sydney Archives)

But the Council admitted it had limited power to act on the complaints. The land had been leased to the circus by the State Government, who had resumed Hyde Park Corner for the construction of Museum Station. Council Health Officers checked the menagerie site for several days and reported that as it was being kept clean, they could not act to shut it down. However, the Town Clerk agreed that it was not a fit place for housing such a collection of wild animals so close to a residential area⁷⁶. During the 1922 and 1923 seasons, the circus animals were housed in the future Shannon Reserve on the corner of Crown and Foveaux Streets, prompting more resident complaints. There was correspondence in April and May 1922 with the Town Clerk⁷⁷, but the details are not available.

However, the complaints during the 1923 season are recorded in the City of Sydney Archives. Following a petition by about 170 residents complaining that the animals were keeping them up at night, Joseph Jackson MLA, the Member for Sydney, led a deputation to the Council. In response, the Council Health Officer reported that the land was leased to Wirth Brothers by the New South Wales

Housing Board (which had resumed the whole block in 1914), and that the Council had no power to grant or refuse permission to occupy the land.

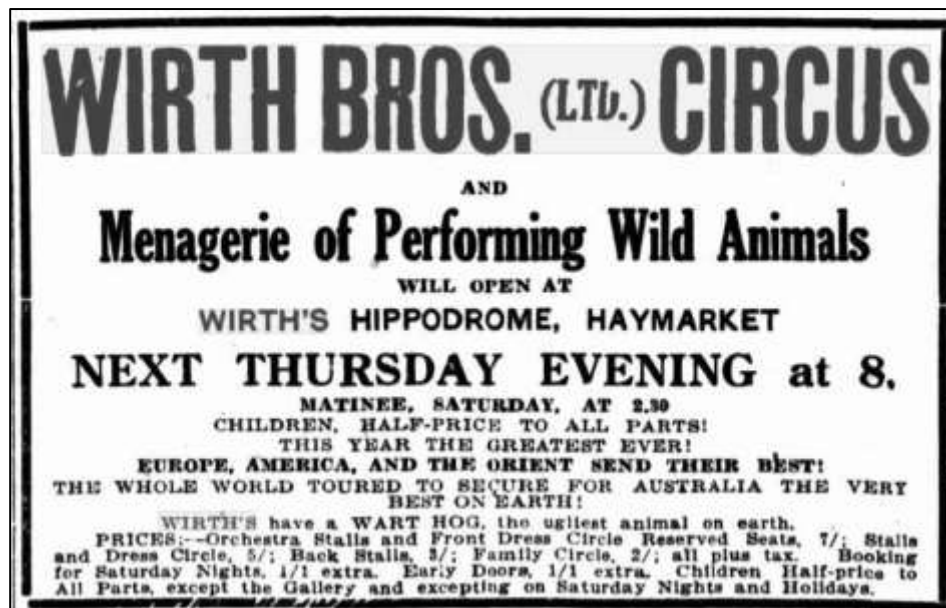


Figure 10 Wirths' Circus advert, 1922 (Sun, 1 April 1922)

The Council could only ensure that it was being kept in a sanitary condition and did not become a nuisance. The circus management had been given a list of sanitary works to be carried out, which were completed in due course. The Lord Mayor sympathised with the residents and said that if he had the power, he would shift them without a moment's delay⁷⁸.

Green spaces and Shannon Reserve

Sydney early parks

Sydney's first recreation ground was proclaimed in 1810 by Governor Lachlan Macquarie who named it Hyde Park after the famous park in central London⁷⁹. Then in 1811, Macquarie proclaimed 490 acres to the south of South Head Road as the Sydney Common⁸⁰. The next major open space was the Sydney Botanic Garden (now the Royal Botanic Gardens), established in 1816.

By the 1860s the rise of organised public recreation created a demand for more public space. Victoria Barracks had been constructed for the British Army regiments in the northern part of Sydney Common in the 1840s, and there were calls to preserve the remaining open ground to prevent further encroachment. In response, Sydney Common was gazetted as a public park in 1866 and renamed Moore Park. This area survives today as the Centennial Parklands, consisting of Moore Park, Centennial Park and Queens Park.

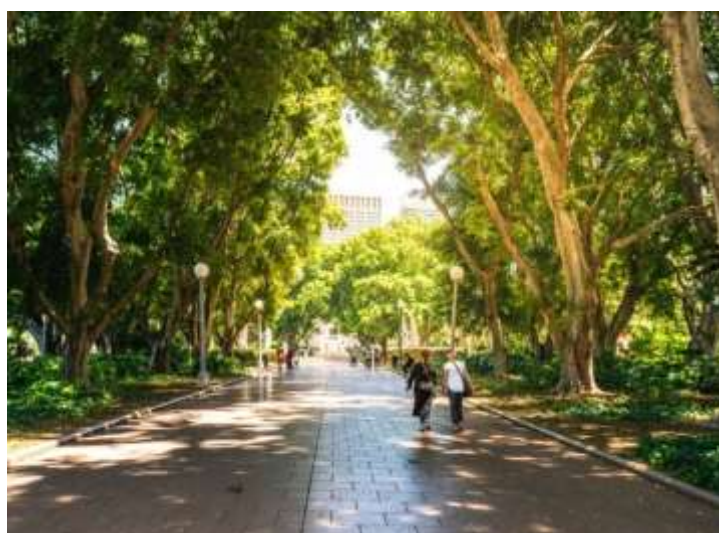


Figure 11 Hyde Park (The Sydney Guide website)

On the western edge of Surry Hills, the Government Paddock was renamed Prince Alfred Park in 1867. This park has survived, despite minor encroachments to construct the railway line to Central Station, and the construction of the Cleveland Paddock School (later called Cleveland Street Boys' High School) on the south-east corner in 1856.

In the 1870s pressure grew from urban reformers and suburban residents for the government to provide parks and recreation areas. Henry Parkes' *Land for Public Purposes Acquisition Act* of 1880 allocated £200,000 to buy land for local parks across the State. The demand was so great that the whole amount was spent in two years.

Charles Moore, the director of the Sydney Botanic Garden from 1848 to 1896, advised custodians of parks throughout Sydney. The next director, Joseph Maiden (director 1896-1924) found that the most heavily populated suburbs, such as Darlington and Newtown, had virtually no open space.

At the same time, the rise of town planning emphasised the need for provision of parkland and green belts. Public parks contributed not only to the beauty of a city but also to its health. The architect Sir John Sulman's 1890 influential lecture "The laying out of towns" marked the beginning

of town planning in Australia, and he advocated for open space and garden suburbs over the next forty years⁸¹.

Charles Bean

Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean (1879-1968) was born at Bathurst. He studied law in England, worked as a barrister and teacher in Sydney, but decided to make his living as a writer after the *Sydney Morning Herald* published several articles from an unpublished book he had written.

He worked for the *Sydney Morning Herald* from 1908 as a correspondent travelling around the State, writing articles from his observations. Then in 1910-1912, he was the *Herald's* London correspondent, also writing books about his areas of interest.



Figure 12 Charles Bean (artist: George Lambert)

He was nominated by the Australian Journalists' Association to be the Government's official war correspondent during World War I. He was recommended for the Military Cross in May 1915 for bravery in action when he helped wounded men at Gallipoli, but as a civilian was not eligible.

He wrote recommendations to the Australian government for an official war history and a national war memorial. The government accepted his proposals, and Bean wrote six volumes of the official war history. He saw the Australian War Memorial open in 1941 and lived to see it become the most popular tourist attraction in Canberra⁸².

Bean was the founder of the Parks and Playgrounds Movement in New South Wales. He was instrumental in bringing together the early planning and conservation movements and ensuring the establishment of a network of green spaces, from playgrounds and sporting fields to public gardens and bushland parks. The qualities of beauty, health, engagement and joy they embody and inspire are a critical part of Bean's legacy.

The movement for green spaces

In response to the problems of unplanned industrial cities in the United Kingdom, the garden city movement emerged as a method of urban planning, begun in 1898 by Sir Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928). Garden cities were intended to be planned, self-contained communities surrounded by “green belts”, containing proportionate areas of residences, industry and agriculture.

The City Beautiful Movement in North America was a reform philosophy of architecture and town planning that flourished during the 1890s and early 1900s, with the aim of introducing beautification and monumental grandeur to cities. It was part of a progressive social reform movement in North America led by the upper-middle class who were concerned with the poor living conditions in all the major cities.

Estate Agent Richard Stanton, who was influenced by the British garden city movement and John Sulman’s town planning ideas, built the model garden suburb Haberfield in 1901, followed by Rosebery from 1912 to the 1920s. The New South Wales Government established the model suburb Daceyville in 1912-1920 (although it was interrupted by World War I and never achieved its intended scope).

The Town Planning Association was founded in 1913. It included a Parks and Playgrounds Committee which would recommend improvements to existing parks, reserves or playgrounds and suggest the reservation or acquisition of land in desirable locations for future parks or playgrounds⁸³. The Parks Preservation Society was founded in 1914 to monitor and act as a brake on the attempts at encroachment on park areas in Sydney⁸⁴.

The *Wild Flowers and Native Plants Act* of 1927 was legislated to regulate wildflower and native plant protection. In response, the Ranger League was formed by Walter Trinick to provide protection and preservation of bushland around Sydney, including advocating for native species to be declared protected⁸⁵. In 1930, Charles Bean founded the Parks and Playgrounds Movement. This organisation followed an earlier Playgrounds Association, founded in 1913, that had some prominent women members and members of the Town Planning Association⁸⁶.

In October 1930, four representatives of the Movement, including David Stead and Arthur Small, met with the Surveyor-General on the question of securing sufficient parks and playing fields⁸⁷. At the first annual general meeting in September 1931, the Movement’s chief aim was adopted: “that every child shall have a chance to play and every citizen the opportunity for recreation”⁸⁸.

By 1932, the Parks and Playgrounds Movement reported that the New South Wales Government was for the first time intending to have a reasoned policy to exploit the natural advantages of Sydney for recreation. The Surveyor-General and representatives from the Movement were investigating the sufficiency or otherwise of existing recreation areas, the needs of the future and the means of meeting those needs⁸⁹. Alderman Ernest Marks supported the need for greater recreation facilities⁹⁰.

Shannon Reserve

In April 1936, members of the Parks and Playgrounds Movement suggested to the City Council Health Committee that they should urge the New South Wales Government to vest in the City Council the area in Surry Hills bounded by Crown, Collins, Foveaux Streets and Richards Lane to be used as a public park and playground for the children of Surry Hills. The site was vacant at the time⁹¹.

The City Engineer, Arnold Hugh Garnsey, told the Council that in view of the location of the land in the midst of a residential area, its proximity to Crown Street Women's Hospital, and the suitable grade, its acquisition as a site for a park would be in the best interests of the city⁹². In July 1936, the Surry Hills Progress Association suggested a King George V Memorial Park on the site (to commemorate the death of the monarch in January 1936). But the Parks and Playgrounds Movement lobbied for the provision of a recreation facility for healthy open-air sports⁹³.



Figure 13 Opening of Shannon Reserve (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 1939)

In October 1937, the New South Wales Cabinet decided to grant a ten-year lease of the site to the City Council for a park and playground. City Council Alderman Thomas Shannon was credited with constantly advocating the provision of the site for the benefit of city children and adults. To this end, he enlisted the support of Cabinet Ministers, the Lord Mayor and Alderman Ernest Marks⁹⁴.

Shannon Reserve was officially opened in August 1939 by the Lord Mayor Sir Norman Nock. It was the only park or reserve dedicated to a modern city alderman. More than 2,000 children attended after the promise of free sweets, fruit and drink⁹⁵. Alderman Shannon spoke at the opening ceremony and credited the efforts of Ernest Buttenshaw, the Minister for Lands, for persuading the State Government to hand the area over to the City Council. He remarked that while the land had only been declared for ten years, it would be a courageous Government that would try and take back the land at the end of that time⁹⁶.

In December 1941, two weeks after the Japanese attack on the American naval base in Pearl Harbour brought Australia into a war in the Pacific, air raid trenches were dug in Shannon Reserve, as well as Camperdown Park, Prince Alfred Park, and Green Park. Hyde Park and Wynyard Park soon followed⁹⁷. In May 1942, Robert Heffron, the Minister for National Emergency Services, announced

that the air raid defence system for the city centre consisted of underground railway tunnels, pillboxes and trenches.



Figure 14 Shannon Reserve air raid shelters 1942 (City of Sydney Archives)

Entrances to the city underground shelters were at Wynyard, St James and Town Hall stations. Other entrances were behind the Conservatorium and in Hyde Park, in Harrington Street and in front of the Mitchell Library. The first program of stronger concrete-lined air raid shelters was underway in local parks: a trench 245 feet long in Shannon Reserve and in other city parks. The longest trench was 720 feet long in Moore Park, alongside South Dowling Street⁹⁸.



Figure 15 Shannon Reserve from above, 1943 (sydney1943.com)

Shannon Reserve after World War II

Postwar recovery

When the wartime structures were removed from Shannon Reserve, fencing and playground equipment were installed in March 1947⁹⁹. At the end of the ten-year period of the State Government handover in May 1949, Shannon Reserve was permanently dedicated as a Public Recreation Ground of 2 roods 25.5 perches¹⁰⁰.



Figure 16 Shannon Reserve benches and shelter, 1960s

Life gradually returned to normal for the residents of Surry Hills, and by 1952 brass bands were playing in Shannon Reserve on Sunday afternoons¹⁰¹.



Figure 17 Shannon Reserve drinking fountain, 1960s (City of Sydney Archives)

Fiesta and market

The Surry Hills Fiesta in Shannon Reserve was first reported in 1979, when it was part of the Sydney Festival¹⁰². In September 1980, the Fiesta was accompanied by the opening of a community mural and a street parade¹⁰³. The range of activities was expanded by 1982 to include a Multimedia Art Show, singers and performers¹⁰⁴.

In 1981, the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre initiated a market in Shannon Reserve, which is held on the first Saturday of each month throughout the year. It was originally established so locals could trade in second-hand or handmade goods and to give the opportunity for local low-income earners to make some extra money. The market continues to showcase the suburb's unique diversity to locals and visitors¹⁰⁵.



Figure 18 Surry Hills Market (Time Out website)

The 1992 Fiesta at Shannon Reserve celebrated the urban environment, when the unionist and environmental activist Jack Munday spoke about the history of the inner-city suburbs. In addition, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence performed a cleansing of the urban environment and there was music by the Urban Acoustic Peasants, food stalls, and flea market bargains¹⁰⁶.



Figure 19 Surry Hills Fiesta, 1982 (Sydney Star Observer photo library)

In about 1999 the Fiesta was renamed the Surry Hills Festival. By 2006, when the attendance had expanded to 30,000, it had outgrown Shannon Reserve and was moved to the much larger Prince Alfred Park¹⁰⁷.

Modernising the reserve

In June 1990, the South Sydney City Council announced its intention of introducing a shared traffic zone in Collins Street next to Shannon Reserve. This would provide an open landscaped area for pedestrian movement and activity alongside the reserve¹⁰⁸.

A complete renovation of the reserve was undertaken at this time, including mosaic tilework. The southern end of the park was paved with bricks which depicted a map of the local streets which is repeated in nested maps in a mosaic pattern of small tiles. In the Collins Street shared zone, the footpaths are decorated with colourful mosaic patterns designed by local school children and completed in 1992¹⁰⁹.



Figure 20 Shannon Reserve construction, 1990s (City of Sydney Archives)

The renovations were completed by 1994 and were officially opened by South Sydney Mayor Vic Smith. The mayor said at the opening that the design and materials reflected the character of the area and were enhanced by the creative input of local residents and school children. A plaque outside the Foveaux Street wall commemorates the occasion¹¹⁰.

The playground was refurbished in 2020 to reflect feedback from local primary school students and members of the community. Lord Mayor Clover Moore reported that “the students told us that they like lots of different experiences on the play equipment and the chance to engage with nature, animals, friends and family”¹¹¹.



Figure 21 Shannon Reserve mosaic map

Prominent buildings nearby

Clock Hotel

Address: 470 Crown Street.

Timeline: 1864-present.

The Exchange Hotel began operation in a draper's shop at 468 Crown Street on the corner of Collins Street and expanded to 470 the same year. Substantial alterations were made in 1923 to create a public bar, increase the parapet and install the clock tower.



Figure 22 Clock Hotel

In 1956, the shop at 472 and the commercial garage at the rear on Collins Lane were incorporated into the hotel. The final property at 474 was incorporated into the pub in 1969 and became the bottle shop. At about this time, the name was changed to the Clock Hotel, to recognise its popular nickname for some years. In 1997-98, the rear section was converted into a sports bar, then in 2006 new smoking laws resulted in this area being opened as an alfresco garden bar and smoking area¹¹².

The Clock Hotel is a popular pub that occupies a commanding position overlooking Crown Street and Shannon Reserve. Apart from an extensive beer selection in the front bar, there is a cocktail bar and a whiskey room to cater for all tastes¹¹³.

Former Wilson's Steam Laundry

Address: 38 Collins Street (now 35 Richards Avenue).

Timeline: 1882-1907.

In 1882, Louis Rosenthal Wilson leased a site on Collins Street between Richards Lane and Richards Avenue from the Burdekin family and constructed a steam laundry. The building showed elements of Victorian Classical style in the detailing of decorative brickwork, with the front door originally located on the corner of Collins Street and Richards Lane. This was the largest single building in the street at the time, an imposing two-storey brick structure, complete with a tall chimney (which is still standing) and a tower on top (later demolished).

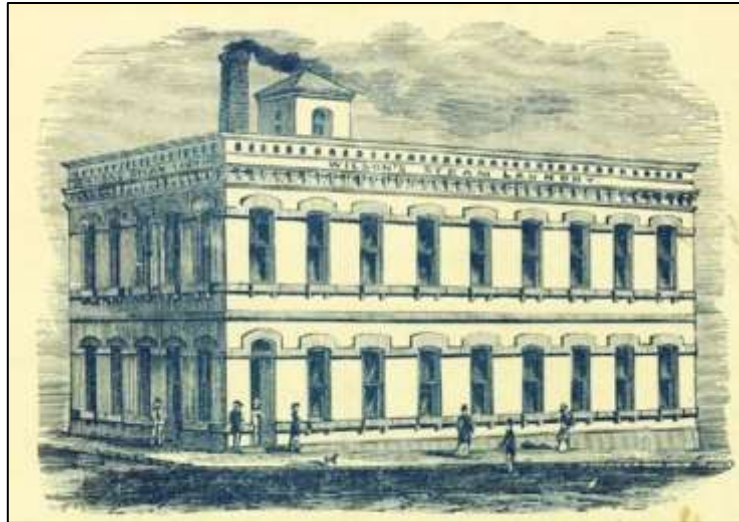


Figure 23 Wilson's Steam Laundry 1880s (City of Sydney Archives)

The laundry closed in 1907 after the 21-year lease ended, and moved to 498-510 Bourke St, on the corner of Arthur St (now the site of the Surry Mews apartment block). Louis Wilson died in 1919, and the Wilson Laundry in Bourke Street finally closed for good in August 1947, due to an acute shortage of labour and materials. It was the largest in Sydney at one point, with eighty staff and an estimated business of £1,000 a week, processing half a million articles a year¹¹⁴.

Former W. E. Woods Pty Ltd, manufacturing chemist

Address: 38 Collins Street (now 35 Richards Avenue) and 40-42 Collins Street (now 28 Richards Avenue).

Timeline: 38 Collins Street (1908-1973), 40-42 Collins Street (c1948-1973).

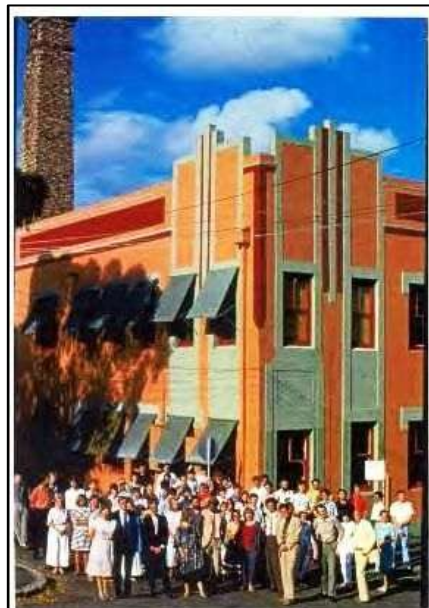


Figure 24 W E Woods, 1970s

In 1907, the British pharmacist William Edward Woods leased the steam laundry building from Sydney Burdekin and in 1908 opened W. E. Woods Pty. Ltd., manufacturing chemists. The company's big seller was Woods' Great Peppermint Cure, a menthol-based expectorant for coughs and colds.



Figure 25 Wood's Peppermint Cure, 1950s

William Woods died in September 1927, but the company continued to operate from the site. In 1936, the exterior of the building was rendered in cement in the Art Deco style, completely changing its appearance. By 1948, the company was also operating in both number 40 and 42 Collins Street, across from Richards Avenue. The company remained in the Collins Street buildings until about 1973¹¹⁵.

Surry Hills Library and Neighbourhood Centre

Address: 405-411 Crown Street.

Timeline: 1956-present.

George Blackmore operated a bottle yard on the site of the present-day library from 1907. By 1948, it was called the Federal Bottle Exchange, owned by the Waterloo Bottle Exchange Pty Ltd, and still run by George Blackmore.

The Council acquired the site in 1950 for the establishment of a branch library, which opened in 1956 as the Anthony Doherty Community Centre. It was later renamed the Surry Hills Library and Neighbourhood Centre, as its original use for public entertainment was replaced by neighbourhood activities, such as various group meetings and classes.



Figure 26 Surry Hills Library, 1956 (City of Sydney Archives)

The building was demolished in 2007 to make way for a new library and community centre, which opened in 2009, receiving widespread acclaim for its design and emphasis on sustainability and energy efficiency¹¹⁶.



Figure 27 Surry Hills Library, 2009 (FJC Studio website)

Former Crown Street Women's Hospital

Address: 351 Crown Street.

Timeline: 1893-1983.

The Crown Street Women's Hospital was established in Hay Street in 1893 and moved to Surry Hills in 1897. It was a public women's and maternity hospital. It also accommodated many single mothers, including State wards, and its staff arranged a large proportion of New South Wales adoptions, some of them forced adoptions.

The hospital aimed to lift medical standards for maternity care and by 1943 was the largest maternity hospital in the State. Thousands of midwives, medical and paramedical professionals were trained there. The hospital closed in 1983, and its facilities were transferred to Westmead Hospital¹¹⁷.



Figure 28 Crown Street Women's Hospital, 1958 (City of Sydney Archives)

Most of the hospital was demolished to construct the Adina Apartment Hotel and apartments in 1994, leaving only the building on the corner of Albion Street which became office space and a medical centre.

White Horse Hotel

Address: 381 Crown Street.

Timeline: 1860s-present.

This is a three-storey hotel that was constructed in the 1860s and then rebuilt in its present form by Tooth & Co in the 1930s. The pub is distinguished by a large sculpture of a rearing silver stallion placed atop the façade during a refurbishment in 2004, after some difficulty convincing Sydney Council that it was an artwork rather than an advertisement¹¹⁸.



Figure 29 White Horse Hotel (realestate.com)

After several iterations in the last couple of decades, the pub now contains a buzzy ground floor restaurant, and upstairs public bar and an outdoor garden bar¹¹⁹.

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