

Return to Community

A History of Balls Head & its Coal Loader



Aboriginal engraving at Balls Head c.1900. North Sydney Heritage Centre/Stanton Library

Balls Head is a special place where many pathways of history intersect. It has been a place of spiritual significance, repose and industry. Most recently, it has become a place for people to explore sustainable development and options for the future of our environment.



The Cammeraygal people met here for thousands of years. They fished the abundant waters around the headland, sheltered in its sandstone overhangs and carved an image of a marine creature – possibly a whale - on a rock platform with views up and down the Harbour.

Thirty years after the arrival of Europeans in 1788, the headland and more than 200 hectares behind was simply given away to merchant Edward Wollstonecraft. The land later passed to his partner Alexander Berry.



Steamer docked for taking on coal, 1940s. Photograph by Robert Donnell. North Sydney Heritage Centre / Stanton Library

There was some development on the eastern side of the peninsular through the 1800s but much of the headland remained undisturbed. In the early 1900s Henry Lawson, who had lived locally over many years, described its 'tracks and tangle' and its 'peaceful hush'. It was a bush oasis for the working people of North Sydney. Lawson was outraged therefore when the government re-acquired the land and leased it to the Sydney Coal Bunkering Company. His protest in poetry was an early expression of conservationism.

The coal loader that operated from 1921 reflected Sydney's place as a major working port and the importance of coal as the fuel that powered modern industry and transport. Balls Head serviced the needs of steamships until the 1960s for the Wallarah Coal Company and then despatched coal for overseas markets through Coal and Allied until 1992. Its obsolescence, in turn, reflected the decline of waterfront industry on Sydney Harbour.

Environmental Earth Sciences ran their pioneering environmental remediation operations from the site from the mid-1990s. By then, North Sydney

Council had been given ownership by the NSW State Government. After community consultations, it was decided that a Centre for Sustainability using the existing infrastructure would ideally serve the interests of local residents and, indeed, people from beyond North Sydney. Its motto is 'Learn from the Past, Embrace the Future'.



View to Balls Head from McMahon's Point 1870s. North Sydney Heritage Centre / Stanton Library

You can find out more about the history of the Coal Loader by following the signs throughout the site or viewing the DVD *Return to Community – A History of Balls Head and its Coal Loader*.

