

Coasters Retreat

The Basin is a naturally enclosed lagoon with a very narrow mouth, which at times allowed the entrance of vessels. The water used to be deeper but it has silted up and the entrance has been closed with a net since 1972. Coaster's Retreat is so named because coastal trading ships used to wait here to sit out storms and to gather in convoys to sail to Sydney.

Terraces were constructed here very early in the nineteenth century to enable settlers and coasters to grow vegetables and crops on a small scale. Since the late nineteenth century this has been popular as a haven for yachts and as a camping ground.

On Saturday 28 March 1891 the Lucinda, the Queensland government yacht, anchored at the Basin. On board was a sub-committee, chaired by Sir Samuel Griffith, which was working towards a draft of the constitution for the Federation of Australia. As the sea was too rough the vessel had come into the calmer waters of the Hawkesbury River and spent the previous night in Refuge Bay.

Situated on the north-western shores of Pittwater, opposite Palm Beach, the settlement here is adjacent to Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. From the beginning of the twentieth century holiday houses and weekenders were gradually constructed, close to the water's edge. Homes can only be reached by water, or on foot through the national park.

Memories

Nancy Henry recalls her six month stay at the Basin in 1913

"...we left early in the morning and we rounded North Head and a terrific gale came up when we were down off Long Reef. And he [her father] had to take the sails off the boat. She was a fore rig so we had a mizzen mast, as well as the main mast and if you don't keep some way on the boat, you'll be overtaken by the following sea.

It was blowing a southerly gale and we were afraid that the sea should break into the cockpit. So we had to leave the jib on and that's how we got down as far as Barrenjoey. Just as we got there a whale, a whale, crossed our bow. Well that was actually dreadful! It was about three times as long as the boat and that's the only time I ever saw my father afraid and he'd been sailing all his life. It was blowing so hard he couldn't run at Barrenjoey, because the southerly comes down there like a funnel, he had to keep on going. He went past Barrenjoey and went as far as Refuge Bay, where we had shelter, but we would've had a very bad time.

The yacht club rang the lighthouse keeper, Charles Smith, to see whether we had gone past though. And he said he had seen a boat go through, but at that stage we were well down towards Long Reef. He said "Look, I fear for their safety". The gale was absolutely dreadful and we were all down in the cabin. There were five children (eventually it was increased to nine children in our family). Anyhow, we tied everything up at Refuge Bay and then we sailed back to the Basin. We had two tents ashore and the yacht moored off the beach. We needed

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that for all the accommodation. And that's where we camped for six months. Everyone went to school from there. At that time the Currawong Beach as it is called now, that was called Little Mackerel, Doctor Styles had a house there and he and his wife lived there for years. We used to walk round on the track from the Basin to, what is called now, Currawong, and catch the Agar there up to Newport school. She'd go all round Pittwater picking up the children. We really enjoyed school and in those days. I think there was only Goddard's boat shed at Palm Beach and the Post Office store on the corner, opposite where the hotel is now, Slate's Post Office Store. That's where we used to get our provisions, but we couldn't buy meat, we had to take a lot of food on the yacht going down and she was pretty well packed up.

When we were down at the Basin, my grandfather was an importer and a provedore and he had his business down near Darling Harbour. He arranged with the owners of the little steamer called The Eringhai. She used to bring down vegetables and fruit, once a week and that's how we got vegetables, cause you couldn't buy them. She'd toot her horn, she'd come in about 4 o'clock and go to the stone wharf down at the Basin, and drop all our things there, my father drove in the dinghy to pick our things up. We were well looked after, from that point of view, so we didn't go without essential food."

Nancy Henry, oral history, 1986.

Reading

"From the earliest records of the colony the bay was known as Coasters Retreat and the lagoon was known as The Basin.

...It was here that the convoys were formed up, the cargoes trimmed for the voyage down the coast. The first recorded convoy left the shelter of Coasters Retreat on 3 March 1803. It was made up of four vessels, the James, the Edwin, the Union and the Argument.

...the small colonial populations living at the Basin began the construction of an elaborate series of terraces cut into the hillside on the northern slope of the hill west of the Basin flat.

It is not possible to document when the terraces were constructed but it is a reasonable guess that it was as a result of the great floods of 1806 and 1809. Those floods would have put the Basin flat metres under water and during the period there were a number of convoys which used the Retreat.

With nothing much to do while the crews were waiting for the weather to allow them to leave for Sydney, it was natural that the levelling of the large residential terrace should have been a focus for their energies.

At a height of about 30 metres above the level of the flat and only about 15 metres in from the flat itself, the residential terrace commences. Its width varies but averages about 10 metres and is still almost perfectly level. This main level stretches along the hillside for more than 80 metres. The length and width of the main terrace is such that there was room for several sets of houses of the style and construction in common use in the early days of the colony which would have been built from the many varieties of timber in the area.

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To the early residents of what was a pirate and bushranger hideaway the terraces were essential to survival. The Basin flat was useless for cultivation as it was virtually a sand dune with a scrappy overlay of poor soil. On the other hand the soil on the lower hillside is excellent as it is semi-rain forest and deep in leaf mould and rich black loam. Without the terraces any cultivation of the soil would have led to the tilled area being washed away in the periodic heavy rains common to the Hawkesbury coast. An engineered drainage system—open but with sandstone-faced sides and base—was built to ensure that the living area and the terraces were not damaged."

James Macken, "The Basin terraces, a little-known colonial ruin", History, 1997.

Further reading

Sue Gould, *Coasters Retreat Pittwater*, 1993.
Historical notes and memories

Joan Lawrence, *Pittwater Paradise*, 1994, *Pittwater Pictorial History*, 2006.
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Local setting for work on Federal constitution.

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Early agriculture

James J. Macken, *Pittwater's War*, 2002.

Jim Macken, *Coasters Retreat*, 1991.
Comprehensive history

Jim Macken, *Martin Burke, the Father of Pittwater*, 1994.
Settlement first part of nineteenth century.

Jim Macken, *Sally Morris of the Basin*, 2001.
Story of Sally, onetime resident.

John Morcombe, "How significant site in our history is filling up with sand", *Manly Daily*, 25/3/1998
Lucinda & Federal constitution, geology of the Basin.

Audrey Shepherd, *Halcyon Days of Pittwater 1842-1992*, 1991.
Land ownership from settlement, especially families there from 1920s onward.