

## BONDI AQUARIUM

In addition to its "creatures from the deep" attractions, the Royal Aquarium and Pleasure Grounds (best known as the Bondi Aquarium) offered its patrons free entertainments on weekends and public holidays. These included variety acts, brass bands and orchestras. Two other features were the Switchback Railway and in later years a roller coaster. The park closed in 1906 and was subsequently transformed into Wonderland City by William Anderson.



Source: Anne Doggett and Gwyn Gillard. *See How They Ring* (2011), 163.

Built on a 14 acre (6 hectares) site by the Bondi Aquarium Ltd consortium in 1887 and named the Royal Aquarium and Pleasure Grounds, Bondi, Sydney's first coastal amusement park was actually located at nearby Tamarama. The park was officially opened on 28 August by Sir Henry Parkes with the entertainment provided by Fred Dark's Combination of Star Artistes. The variety artists included W. B. Warner, Frank York, Kate Carey, Harry and Lucy Cottier. Two military bands also played for the public.

The Aquarium, which promoted its feature attraction as "Wonders of the Deep," initially included in its several tanks an array of aquatic life - notably catfish, bream, whiting, mullet, lobsters, stingrays, porcupine-fish, turtles, a wobbegong shark and a tiger shark. The Waverly Library also records that among the most popular inhabitants were the seals, which shared a pond with a solitary penguin.

In addition to its "creatures from the deep attractions," the venue (eventually known simply as the Bondi Aquarium) also included the Switchback Railway (which carried passengers 930 feet from cliff to cliff in 10 seconds), two skating rinks (illuminated by electric lights), merry-go-rounds, shooting galleries, water boats, Punch and Judy shows, a camera obscura and well-manicure gardens. Pain's Fireworks were also set off every Wednesday. Other attractions added over the years including a plunging roller coaster that dived and twisted over the beach. The popularity of the park also led to a rival aquarium being built at nearby Coogee.

Management provided free entertainments on weekends and public holidays, with these including variety acts, brass bands and orchestras. During its almost thirty years of operations the Aquarium was therefore a source of additional income for countless local variety performers. Indeed, most of the leading Australian or Australian-based performers of that period played there at one time or another. Among the best known performers were Harry Clay, Charlie Fanning, the Perman Trio, Martyn Hagan, the Leopold Brothers, the Leslie Brothers, Sam Rowley, the Faust Family. In 1892 the management also procured Meston's Wild Australia, a company which boasted 35 of the Fiercest Aboriginal Fighting Men. Other special attractions included a wire walking feat from cliff to cliff by Alexander ("the Australian Blondin"), Captain George Drevar floating on a cask raft through the pounding surf, and a Grand Balloon Ascent and Parachute Descent (Waverley Heritage).

The park was forced to close for several months in 1891 after the aquarium and pavilion were destroyed by fire on 11 July. Among the host of special attractions that day were Frank Smith's Alhambra Music Hall company, the Theatre Royal orchestra, and the "Australian team" of specialty dancers known as Delohery, Craydon and Holland. Anne

Doggett and Gwyn Gillard note that despite the efforts of the Metropolitan and Volunteer fire brigades little could be saved:

The strong wind, the flammable nature of the buildings, and the inadequate water supply prevented any hope of a successful outcome. Efforts to utilise the salt water were unsuccessful. By around 10pm the fire, which had begun in the stage area of the hall, had almost burned itself out, leaving only a few blackened remnants in the pavilion, melted and split glass from the fish tanks and plenty of dead fish. The sheet music of the pianists and other instrumentalists was also destroyed (163).

After a massive clean-up and speedy organisation the park's management was able to reopen for the anticipated end-of-year school holiday crowds. A number of improvements were made, too, including an enlarged theatre space (with a dress circle and bigger stage area). New staircases, paths, fountains and gardens and lawns were also built. The official opening of the new park took place on 2 December, with the ceremony overseen by the Mayor and aldermen of Sydney. Entertainment was provided by the MacMahon brothers Theatre Royal orchestra and Frank Smith's full vaudeville and minstrel company. In all 50 artists took part in the programme (SMH: 2 Dec. 1891, 7)..

While the Aquarium's ownership and management changed several times throughout its existence, arguably the best-known proprietor was Alfred Wyburd (1890-1894). The last identified concert at the Aquarium was in July 1906. Soon afterwards the site was sold by Margaret J. Lachaume to William Anderson who transformed the amusement park into Wonderland City.

### **SEE ALSO**

- [Alfred Wyburd](#)



Source: "Waverly Heritage No 11. Waverly Library (NSW)

### **FURTHER REFERENCE**

"[At the Bondi Aquarium.](#)" SMH: 1 Oct. (1887), 8.

"[Bondi Aquarium.](#)" Waverly Heritage No 11. *Waverly Council*. [sighted 24/10/2012]

**See also:**

**SMH:** 2 Dec. (1891), 7.

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