

BONDI AQUARIUM

aka **Royal Aquarium and Pleasure Grounds**

(1887-1906) Opened to the public on 28 September 1887, the Royal Aquarium and Pleasure Grounds (best known as the Bondi Aquarium) was best known for its "creatures from the deep" attractions. However, management routinely 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 initially named the Royal Aquarium and Pleasure Grounds, Bondi, Sydney's first coastal amusement park was actually located at nearby Tamarama. The Aquarium 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. Exactly a month later the management opened the Aquarium to the public. In an article published a few days later *Sydney Morning Herald* scribe, "Viator," writes of the new venture:

Forty minutes in the tram brings one to the terminus at Bondi, and 10 minutes more, over a road at present not provocative of piety to the pedestrian troubled with those obtrusive callosities, known in the people's dictionary as corns, is sufficient to reach the aquarium at Bondi. The aquarium occupies the seaward half of Fletcher's Glen, a lovely and romantic little valley, somewhat to the right of Bondi Beach. The grounds include the pretty little beach of white sand at the extremity of the glen, upon which the blue, white-crested waves of the mighty Pacific dash themselves unceasingly in peace or wrath, as the will of the wind dictates! The spot is one extremely appropriate for an aquarium, on account of its marine surroundings and natural picturesqueness.... (8).

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 Waverley Library also records that among the most popular inhabitants were the seals, which shared a pond with a solitary penguin.

TWO SHOWMEN.—Showmen desirous of exhibiting at the grounds of the Royal Aquarium, at Bondi, to be opened to the public about the middle of September next, are requested to communicate by letter to Box 386, G. P. O., Sydney.

Sydney Morning Herald 13 Aug. 1887, 19.

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. Over the 1887/1888 holiday period Australian Blondin imitator James Alexander enthralled visitors with his walk from cliff to cliff via a high wire. Among the permanent 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.

THE ROYAL AQUARIUM AND PLEASURE GROUNDS, BONDI.

SPECIAL ATTRACTION.

BLONDIN, BLONDIN, BLONDIN,
will perform wonderful and daring feats on the wire rope, from **CLIFF TO CLIFF,**
Every Afternoon and Evening.

GRAND OPEN-AIR ASPHALT SKATING RINK,
Illuminated every night by **THE ELECTRIC LIGHT.**

PAIN'S GRAND FIREWORKS and ILLUMINATIONS EVERY WEDNESDAY EVENING.

The MOST COMPLETE AQUARIUM IN THE WORLD.
The Largest Variety of Fish.

SATURDAY, 21st. — SATURDAY, 21st.
CAPTAIN GEORGE DREYER,
late of the well-known clipper ship Norfolk, will, at about 4 o'clock, **CAST OFF AT SEA**
from a vessel opposite the Aquarium, at least a mile from the shore, and will land at the Aquarium on his **Celebrated CASK RAFT,** for which he received the silver medal and diploma of honour from the London Fisheries Exhibition.
This will be the **MOST DANGEROUS EXPERIMENT** ever attempted in connection with **LIFE-SAVING GEAR,** and will be carried out even though the weather be **STORMY and TEMPESTUOUS.**

Open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sundays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Admission—1s; children, 6d.
TRAMS RUN TO THE GATES.

BONDI AQUARIUM.
TO-DAY, SATURDAY.
GRAND PROGRAMME.
5 PERFORMANCES ON THE LAWN FREE.
Our Performing Seals and Sea Leopard fed at 3.45 and 6.

FULL BRASS BAND.
3 MAN-EATING SHARKS JUST CAPTURED.
The Flying Machine. The Switchback Railway.

TO-MORROW, SUNDAY,
GRAND VOCAL and INSTRUMENTAL CONCERT.
Special Engagement of Miss Glendenning, Miss Phillips, Mr. Mackenzie, Mr. Wilson, and others,
at 4.15 p.m.

SPECIAL PROGRAMME. — NO EXTRA CHARGE.
MONDAY—8-HOUR DAY—MONDAY.
MONDAY From 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. **ALL FOR ONE**
MONDAY **IMMENSE PROGRAMME.** **ONE**
MONDAY **THE FAUST FAMILY.** **SKIL-**
MONDAY **THE PERMANS.** **LING.**

COMO KETCHIK SKATING RACES.
seeking For Gold.

THE MAN-EATING SHARKS ON VIEW.
16 Performances on the Lawn.
The Flying Machine, the Switchback Railway, the Donkeys, Ponies, Swings, See-Saws, Merry-go-Round, Camera and 100 other Amusements.
Parents give their Children a Day's Treat, Visit the Bondi Aquarium.
The Whole of the Grounds brilliantly Illuminated by Electricity.
Hot Water for Picnic Parties Free.
BRASS BAND from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Re-opening of the Photographic Studio under fresh Management. Refreshments of the Best Quality.
Special Trams. Last Tram, 11.16 p.m.
J. H. WILLIAMS, Secretary.

BONDI AQUARIUM.
Manager Alfred Wyburd.

TO-MORROW AFTERNOON (Saturday), JULY 26.
IMMENSE PROGRAMME.
Special Engagement of Signor Gurnia, in his great imitation of English and Foreign Singing Birds (from Crystal Palace, England); Miss A. Freeman, the Charming Contralto; the Leopold Brothers, in their celebrated Acrobatic Acts and Flying Trapeze performance; Mr. E. G. Wilson, &c., &c. Trams every few minutes. **ADMISSION, 1s.**

BONDI AQUARIUM.
Manager Alfred Wyburd.

SUNDAY NEXT, JULY 27.
GRAND SACRED and CLASSICAL CONCERT.
The Pinnacle reached at Last. Nothing Succeeds like Success.
Admission **FREE** by **TICKET ONLY.** Tickets can be obtained by application to the Manager.
Participating Artists:—Miss Tilly Salingier, Miss Ada Baker, Miss Violet Melrose, Mr. Harry Hastings, **SIGNOR GURNIA.** Special engagements of the Spanish Students. Pianist, Mr. E. G. Wilson.
THE CITY BAND—20 PERFORMERS, 20.

L-R: *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 Jan. 1888, 2. •
Daily Telegraph (Sydney) 5 Oct. 1889, 2. •
Australian Star (Sydney) 25 July 1890, 1.

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 specialty dancers [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.¹



Bondi Aquarium, 1 Jan. 1891.

Photo by Henry King, Sydney. Source: Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences

THE FIRE AT THE BONDI AQUARIUM.

A FIRE, upon the origin of which light has yet to be thrown, broke out at the Bondi Aquarium on Saturday night at about a quarter to 9 o'clock, and within a very short space of time the whole building and surroundings were completely burned out. The first to arrive at the place was the Waverley and Woollahra Volunteer Companies; but their efforts, as were those of the M.F.B., who turned up later, were, in consequence of a very inadequate supply of water, almost useless. By 10 o'clock, despite the good work of Superintendent Bear and his men, the fire had completely burned itself out, and only a few grilled fish, blackened walls and charred rafters remained of the once gaudy pavilion. According to Mr. Wyburd, the place was locked up as usual at 6 o'clock, the gas being turned all but off. Everything was then right, and the first he knew of the fire was about a quarter-past 8, when several explosions occurred. The building was insured for £5600.

Australian Star (Sydney) 13 July 1891, 7.

¹ Anne Doggett and Gwyn Gillard. *See How They Ring*. Bakery Hill, Vic: BHS Publishing, 2011, 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.²

While the Aquarium's ownership and management changed several times throughout its existence, arguably the best-known proprietor was Alfred Wyburd (1890-1894). In March 1906 the site was sold by Margaret J. Lachaume to theatrical entrepreneur William Anderson who soon afterwards announced his plan to transform it into an amusement park. Anderson reportedly paid £3,750 for the property.³ The new park opened later the same year as Wonderland City.

Although work on the old Aquarium grounds began soon after the sale, its entertainment auditorium continued to be used for local events up until July. These included charity functions and fundraisers. The Waverly Council records that final concert, a fundraiser for the Waverley Benevolent Society, took place that month. The last published advertisement for a function appeared in mid June for a Gypsy Tea to be held by the St Mary's Girls' Association on 20 June.⁴

During its almost thirty years of operations the Bondi Aquarium's various owners and manager provided entertainments on weekends and public holidays as part of the entry fee. These ranged from variety acts to brass bands and orchestras. In this respect served as an important 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.

Some of the best of the known performers to appear at the Aquarium included [Harry Clay](#), [Charlie Fanning](#), the Perman Trio, [Steve Adson](#), [Amy Blackie](#), [Martyn Hagan](#), the Leopold Brothers, the Leslie Brothers, [Sam Rowley](#), the Faust Family, Johnny Cowan, [Delohery](#), [Craydon and Holland](#), [Scott and Wallace](#), Blanche Montague, Harry Crawford, [Fred Leslie](#), Annetta Scasi, [Harry Leston](#), and music director T.W. Rhodes. In 1892 the management even 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).

NEW BONDI AQUARIUM.
Proprietor and Manager ... Alfred Wyburd.

THE GREATEST EVENT EVER WITNESSED IN AUSTRALIA.
THE GRAND OFFICIAL OPENING
of the Aquarium will take place on
THIS DAY, THURSDAY, December 3, 1891,
commencement of programme at 8 p.m. sharp,
continuing till 10 p.m.

under the distinguished patronage of his WORSHIP THE
MAYOR AND ALDERMEN OF SYDNEY, the UNITED
GRAND LODGE OF NEW SOUTH WALES OF
ANCIENT FREE AND ACCEPTED MASONS, LORD
SHEFFIELD and his ENGLISH TEAM OF
CRICKETERS, CAPTAINED by the CELEBRATED
DR. W. G. GRACE; the NEW SOUTH WALES
CRICKETING ASSOCIATION, the CYCLING, FOOT-
BALL, ROWING, and YACHTING CLUBS OF SYDNEY
(all Cyclists will appear in uniform), GEO. RIGNOLD,
Esq., and COMPANY of HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE,
Messrs. M'MAHON and THE EVANGELINE COMPANY
of the THEATRE ROYAL, Messrs. BROUOH and
BOUCHICAULT and COMPANY of the CRITERION
THEATRE, Messrs. HISCOCKS and WILSON and Miss
JENNY LEE'S COMPANY of the GARRICK THEATRE,
Mr. FRANK SMITH and his FULL COMPANY from the
ALHAMBRA and the SIE JOSEPH BANKS, BOTANY;
Superintendent BEAR and the METROPOLITAN FIRE
BRIGADES.

To signalise the event of the Official Opening,
THE ORCHESTRA
of the
THEATRE ROYAL
will
RENDER THE OVERTURE
of
EVANGELINE,
by kind permission of Messrs. MacMahon,
conducted by the Composer,
Mr. EDWARD E. RICE.

The Glass of the New Aquarium is now fixed in position
by the contractors, Messrs. Bignall and Clark.
A large and varied stock of specimens are being obtained
from the sister colonies and our own waters.
The following Artists have kindly volunteered their
services:-

THE THEATRE ROYAL ORCHESTRA
(By kind permission of Messrs. MacMahon).
THE ALHAMBRA ORCHESTRA
(By kind permission of Frank Smith, Esq.)
under the conductorship of Mr. H. Lockhead.

The Leslie Brothers	Sylvo the Innovator
Monsieur Provo	Mr. Percy Shannon
Mr. F. M. McKay	Mr. Charles Fanning
Mr. Harry Leston	Mr. Harry Crawford
Mr. E. Toussard	Mr. Johnny Cowan
Mr. Harry Hastings	Mr. J. S. Porter
Mr. T. Sadler	Mr. E. Leonard
Mr. E. George Wilson	Mr. H. Compton
Herr von Gotch	Mr. Alf. Santley
Mr. Phil Walsh	Mr. J. Brailey
Mr. C. Symes	Mr. C. Thompson
Mr. Will Connelley	Mr. T. Edwards
Mr. Steve Adson	Mr. G. Brailey
Mr. Harry Fairfield	Professor Bass
Mr. Herbert Bowley	Master Fred. Leslie
Mr. J. South	Mr. Harry Sinclair.

THE AUSTRALIAN TEAM (Messrs. Delohery, Craydon, and Holland), by kind permission of Mr. Frank Smith.

Miss Bay Cowan	Miss Annetta Scasi
(by kind permission of Mr. Frank Smith.)	
Miss Amy Blackie	Miss Blanche Montagu
Miss Ettie Diamond	Miss Lillie James
Miss Addie Macarthur	Middle de la Roche
Miss Hetty Kennedy	Miss Ruby Warren
Miss Amy Davis	Miss Nellie Harland.

Miss Phoebe Levy	Miss Florence Crawford
Miss Eva Levy	Miss Sadie Stringham, of the County Fair Company.

The BRITANNIA BRASS BAND.

The Grounds will be brilliantly illuminated by
Electric Light.
Open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Four-in-Hand Drags provided by Mr. J. Coffill.
Decorations by Messrs. Sale and Dars.
Floral Decorations by Messrs. Peares Bros., King-street.
No Advance in the Price of Admission.
Adults, 1s; Children, 6d.
Special arrangements have been made for trams to run
every five minutes from 1.30 to 7 p.m.

Sydney Morning Herald 3 Dec. 1891, 2.

SEE ALSO

- [Alfred Wyburd](#)

² Editorial, 7.

³ "The Strutter's Page." *Newsletter: An Australian Paper for Australian People* (Sydney) 10 Mar. 1906, 3.

⁴ *Catholic Press* 14 June 1906, 22. [Advert.](#)



Royal Aquarium and Pleasure Grounds, Tamarama, ca. 1891
 By C.G. Coulter From the collections of the State Library of New South Wales (Mitchell Library)

FURTHER REFERENCE

- "Bondi Aquarium: An Ambitious Scheme." *Sydney Morning Herald* 17 Apr. 1906, 4.
- "Bondi Aquarium: The Opening, The." *Evening News* (Sydney) 29 Sept. 1887, 6.
- "Amusements: Bondi." *Evening News* (Sydney) 1 Jan. 1894, 2.
- "Amusements: The Bondi Aquarium." *Evening News* (Sydney) 4 Dec. 1891, 5.
- "Bondi Aquarium." Waverly Heritage No 11. *Waverly Council*. [sighted 10/05/2022]
- "Bondi Aquarium, The." *Evening News* (Sydney) 25 July 1887, 5.
- "Bondi Aquarium, The." *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) 4 Dec. 1891, 3.
- [Editorial]. *Sydney Morning Herald* 2 Dec. 1891, 6-7.
- [Editorial]. *Sydney Morning Herald* 4 Dec. 1891, 6-7.
- "Fire at The Bondi Aquarium, The." *Australian Star* (Sydney) 13 July 1891, 7.
- "Viator." *At the Bondi Aquarium.* *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 Oct. 1887, 8.

BOND I AQUARIUM.
 THIS AFTERNOON, SATURDAY, JANUARY 3:
 CONTINUATION OF HOLIDAY PROGRAMME.
 Including the following Artists:—Mr. Harry Gilbert, Mr. Sam Rowley, Mr. Harry Creamer, Mr. Harry Sinclair, Mr. George Turner; Mr. Harry Fairfield, the Australian Blondin; Mr. Fred. Norris, Champion Skater of Australia; Miss Phoebe Levy, Champion Juvenile Skater of the World; Professor Canaris, and the Britannia Brass Band.
 Admission, 1s; Children, 6d. Tram fare, 4d.

BOND I AQUARIUM.
 TO-MORROW AFTERNOON, SUNDAY, JANUARY 4,
 Special Sacred and Classical Concerts.
 A NEW YEAR'S SURPRISE.
 Participating Artists:
 Miss Amy Rowe, Miss Ruth Wallace, Mr. W. Cadzow, Mr. Harry Sinclair, Mr. Harry Gilbert, Mr. S. Kowley, Mr. P. Mohr.
 Admission free on application to the manager.
 The management reserve the right to refuse admission to any person.

BOND I AQUARIUM.
 Proprietor and Manager, Alfred Wyburd.

WILD	LAST DAY OF	AUSTRALIA
WILD		AUSTRALIA

Admission 1s, Children 6d; Tram Fare 4d.

Daily Telegraph (Sydney) 20 Jan. 1893, 2.

Sydney Morning Herald 3 Jan. 1892, 2.