The Industrial Village of Woolwich

By Connie Ewald

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Preface

This story arose from an accidental meeting with Alan Hunt, the last manager of the Sydney Smelting Company at Woolwich. The company left the district in 1967 after about seventy years in which it produced half the tin refined in Australia. Our meeting brought up a number of questions, starting with the effects of the smelter on Kelly's Bush but spreading out to the whole community. Why was a tin smelter built at Woolwich and how did it operate? How did working at the smelter compare with working in the other industries of early Woolwich, especially the dock? What held the social networks of the industrial village together, and how firm was the divide between workmen and gentry? What was life like for the unemployed, and for children, in and out of school?

In trying to find answers to these questions I spoke to many friends and neighbours and followed the paper trail through the usual libraries and archives. It was often difficult to discover exact dates of local events, because fire at the Town Hall in 1978 had destroyed nearly all the old documents. The story which follows makes no pretence of being a thorough history. It is merely the outline of a local cohesive neighbourhood, most of whose story has not previously been recorded. It connects to the history of the rest of Sydney as another example of the displacement of heavy industry from the shores of the inner harbour.

The section on the smelter comes towards the end, so as better to contrast it with other workplaces. Readers who already know about the school, the village people, or working at the dock may like to start with the smelter, and discover an enterprise of modest size which resisted down-sizing and lasted for over seventy years. Its history has many links with the development of the colony and of the nation.

Perhaps the story may help to retrieve a few of the old community values. - ***C.E.***

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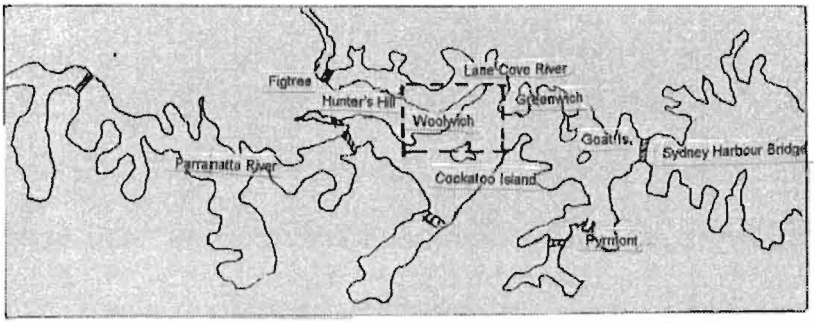
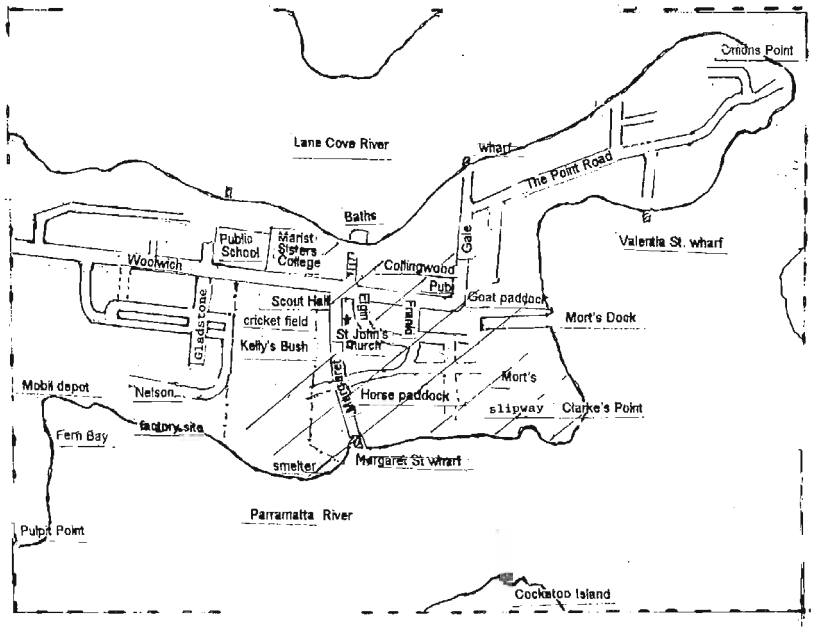
Looking west from Woolwich up the Parramatta River. The Marist Sisters' College is the building on the right of Woolwich road in the middle of the peninsula opposite the open playing field. Nearly all distinguishable houses in the lower part of the picture could be considered part of the village. Woolwich Dock, Mort's Shipbuilding slipways, Margaret street wharf, Sydney Smelting Company works and the Mobil depot can be seen on the Parramatta River foreshores. Note the Mort's Company houses on Alfred and Edgcliff streets, the width of the track through Kelly's bush and the flat areas of reclaimed waterfront land, such as the Horse Paddock.



Inner Sydney Harbour



Woolwich about 1950 –
"Industrial Woolwich" shaded

The Industrial Village of Woolwich

Setting the scene

Woolwich is spread along the ridge of the narrow rocky peninsula which separates the mouth of the Lane Cove river from the Parramatta. The western heights are commanded by the Marist Sisters' College. Beyond that, the peninsula is connected to the more salubrious suburb of Hunters Hill. On the eastern end the homes of substantial burghers look north onto the wooded bays of Lane Cove, or east across the river mouth to Greenwich, the Harbour Bridge and the city skyline, two miles away by ferry, gull or shark.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the rivers were the main highways which connected a few waterfront industries and a small village to the rest of the city and the world. At the end of the century, waterfront industry has departed, not only from Woolwich but from Balmain, Cockatoo Island and the more western parts of Sydney Harbour. Heavy transport no longer relies on the rivers. Instead, Woolwich now has the usual mixture of modest and pretentious or graceless suburban development. But the Department of Defence has done us a favour. The threatened sale of army waterfront land has helped to remind us of the district's industrial past - its dock and smelter, its workmen and the community they built around them.

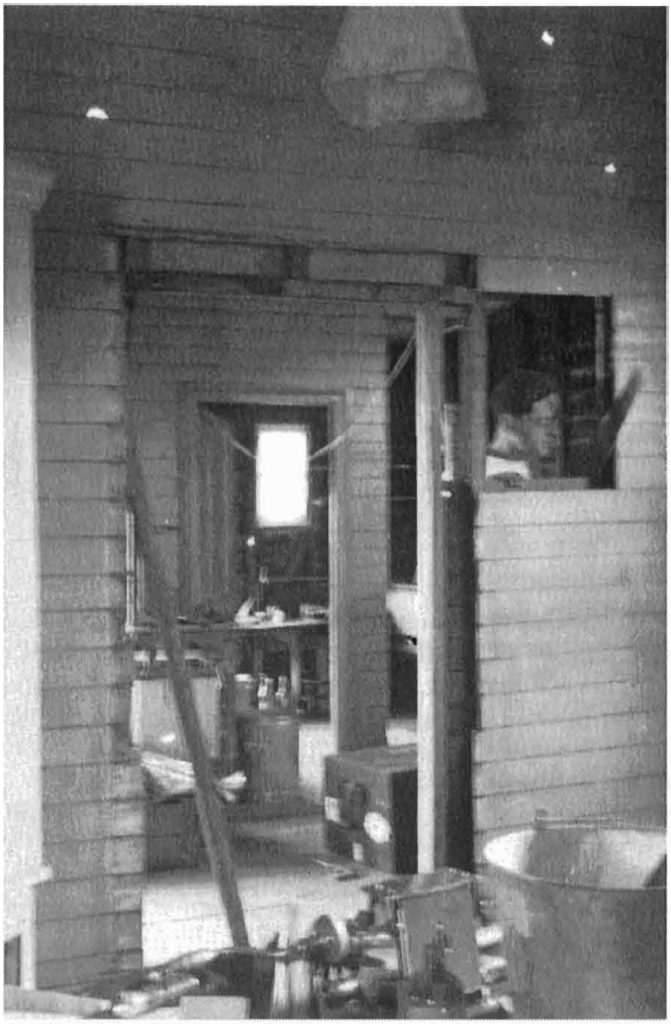
The popular published histories of Hunters Hill focus on old stone walls and gracious establishments, but only fifty years ago the labourers from Cockatoo, Mort's Dock, and the Sydney Smelting Company were the basis of the social network in the waist of the peninsula, roughly below Gladstone Avenue and west of Gale Street, "the

industrial village of Woolwich". The old houses have been well documented by Diana Drake and Ros Maguire.[1] This account concentrates on the people rather than the buildings.

The people in the village were connected to the other groups on the peninsula through their schools, sports and churches, and with the wider community of the colony or state through the cycles of boom or bust in economic activity. They were separated from outsiders by their strong family connections and by their awareness of themselves as a working class community. The ways in which they were connected or separated make one of the themes of this story.

As outsiders we moved into an old cottage in Woolwich Road in the early fifties. The previous owners had been Carpenters, like the man who had lighted the local gas lamps until he was well over seventy years old.[2] The paint was peeling, and except for the track to the dunny almost the whole front garden was planted with potatoes. One of our neighbours, Nan O'Byrne, soon discovered that by misadventure we had no furniture, so she brought us their camping table and chairs and gave instructions on how to make a laundry copper from a kerosene tin. Between the O'Byrne's house and ours was a vacant block on which Nan's grandsons played football. The vacant land is now covered with home units, and we do not even know the names of many of our rapidly changing neighbours.

By the 1950s some of the working families had already been in Woolwich for generations. There are records of the same families as carpenters, labourers or fishermen in the 1840s. In 1861 John Burge, carpenter, was one of the signatories of the petition for the creation of a municipality, along with Joubert, Jeanneret and other gentry. In the 1950s Jack Burge, our other neighbour, was in the middle of his working life at Cockatoo and his relatives still lived in Collingwood Street and in a set of cottages above the Woolwich



Starting a simple bathroom in a Woolwich cottage, 1954. "Only termites lived in luxury".

Baths. Like other families, they divided land between sons, brothers and nephews with scant regard to the niceties of surveyors or any rules about the minimum distances between houses. Bowls of soup could have been passed between side windows in Woolwich Road. Bathrooms might consist, like ours, of a pipe above and a hole below. The night soil man took care of some of the human waste and much of the rest was thrown over the cliff. Only termites lived in luxury.

The working community into which we intruded was tightly knit, and they knew all about each other. Mavis Coleman, who came to Woolwich as a baby in 1915 and lived there for most of her life, wrote an account of the local families, their houses, children and life events, for her niece. She knew the names and relationships of successive owners or tenants in nearly every street - sometimes even the grandchildren and pets, including the emu in The Point Road.[3]

A few descendants of the old families and some of the old cottages remain, though much transformed. Not much remains of the industries on which many of the workers depended. The gash of Woolwich Dock is still there, protected by Heritage listing, together with some old buildings and machinery. Nothing much is left of the Sydney Smelting Company, which employed fifty or sixty local men for over seventy years. The smelter site has become a public park, levelled and grassed and decorated with a few maritime objects from other places, arranged as industrial art. Other industries have left only some scraps of story, stone, or radioactive particles.

The best connections with the industrial past are a few of the workmen, either labourers or managers. Alan Hunt, the last manager at the smelters, spent most of his working life there. At eighty-one he still has detailed memories of the works, the process, and the mines which supplied most of the ore. As well, he can

Collingwood street cousins, 1941.
Neville Coleman, whose mother knew the connections of nearly every family in the village and his cousin Estelle Patience, now Willis, aged 3 and 2, seen in Collingwood street in July, 1941. In more recent times Estelle helped to organise the campaign to keep the shelter at Valentia street wharf for public use.

recall the workmen, the social network and the spirit of the place. Keith Murray managed some war-time projects at Mort's Dock and Izzy Wyner spent some time there as a painter and docker just after the war. The social past is more accessible, and there are many residents who can still connect us in a fragmentary way to the first half of the century.

The Social Centres

Hours of work were long and leisure time was mostly spent locally. People met each other at the pub, church or shops, at the Woolwich Baths or sports fields, at the school or on the ferries. More solitary people went fishing or tended their chooks and vegetables.

Pub, church and shops
The pub had been built in 1891, in expectation of a rapidly increasing number of customers, and was so successful that the Anglican church soon felt the need to rescue souls and sailors through the All Saints Mission Church. Some of the Woolwich workmen had big thirsts. Thirsty gentry gathered in a separate room with higher prices, and women were scarcely to be seen.

The Mission Church was established in the wooden hall in Elgin Street formerly used by the Congregational Church. Its adherents soon ran their own parish, independent of All Saints, Hunters Hill. To demonstrate the strength of their local congregation, separate from Hunter's Hill, they even built their own brick church. There was a great celebration at the laying of the foundation stone by the Governor in 1908. He travelled by Government launch and was escorted to the site with a regimental band and much fanfare.[4]

The history of St John's has been well recorded by Margaret Spinks and published by the Hunter's Hill Trust.[5] The congregation included some of the middle classes as well as the labouring families, although a few of the gentry continued to attend All Saints at Hunter's Hill. The old wooden church hall, and its rival, the pub, were the twin social centres.

Over forty years, the Minutes of the Church Wardens and Council record the use of the church hall by many community groups: the

St. John's Sunday School Picnic – about 1938. Three of the girls in the middle row contributed to this story. They are Margaret Berney (Strange), Pat Porteous (Joiner) and Jennifer Korner (Woods), second, third and seventh from the right respectively.

Progress Association, the "Woolwich Centre to relieve distress in the district", Scouts and cubs, a children's centre and library, and a club for men of the Merchant Navy, especially for "Fijian Boys" while their ship was under repair at the dock, during the war. Dances, concerts and socials were held there. In 1930 money was raised for members of the Woolwich cricket team who had lost their jobs. In the late forties and early fifties an energetic young clergyman led an active young people's group, which met after school for crafts and games. They switched adherence to the Presbyterians when the young Anglican minister was replaced by an elderly colleague. In the 1970s, and until it was burned down in 1993, the hall was used by the Hunters Hill Dramatic Society.

I have been told that at one meeting of the St John's Church Guild in the 1950s an un-named lady insisted that they should immediately do something about the twenty eight brothels which she claimed were set up near the dock, but I have not seen a record of brothels in the Minutes or found people who could identify the sites of such rich choices. Various people spoke of wandering sailors and lascars offering watches, and others identify one house of doubtful reputation in Gale Street, at the corner of Collingwood. It is now a graceful family home.

More publicly, people met in the shops along Woolwich Road. The shops had changed over the years. The Electoral Roll for East Ward, 1891, shows one shop in each of Gale and Palser Streets, with another shop and two bakeries in Woolwich Road. (Palser St is now The Point Road). By the 1950s the bakers had gone and the shops were clustered in Woolwich Road near the pub and dock, with one small outlying shop and cottage at the corner of Margaret Street.

Only the shop on the pub side was prospering. The general store near the corner of Franki and Woolwich, which had been very popular during the depression because of generous credit, was gradually emptying its shelves as the stock was transmuted into fumes of brandy, to ease the passing of the ancient and well-loved owner.

For some years a corner of this shop was a Post Office, now mainly remembered because its last postmistress was Miss Llewellyn, a lovely lady often sheltered by a large red hat when fashion was hatless. Like many of the women of her generation who propped up families or communities, she had lost her fiancee in the 1914-18 war. She later became an assistant or relief for Mrs. Gledhill, who ran the Post Office agency on the pub side, now a corporate office. Mrs.Gledhill practised Christianity by maintaining the Post Office as a sort of social welfare centre, always ready with quiet help for drinkers, gamblers and the bereaved.

Shop at the corner of Woolwich Road & Franki Avenue, looking much as it did in the mid-fifties. The site is now occupied by Bardelli's and a private house. (photo, undated, Hunter's Hill Historical Society).

Harmony of a different order was kept by the policeman, often visible near the pub. In the thirties there had been a policeman's house in Franki Avenue, with a small lock-up behind, for drunken brawlers. Later, a police booth with telephone occupied a spot at the top of Gale St. opposite the pub. The Hunters Hill police station at Figtree, abolished when the new bridge was constructed, sent a large constable called Pat to parade on the corner.

Dissolving class divisions ? The baths and the playing fields

The village area was beautiful, if not salubrious. It had fine north-facing baths on the Lane Cove River and a slightly bumpy and sloping playing field at the top of the hill, with a view across the bush to the city. The air however, was often black and grimy, especially when a ship was being moved into the dock.

It was also beyond the social pale for some people from The Hill. For instance, Kath Christie, a descendant of the early Clarke landholders, who has lived in Elgin Street for nearly all of her eighty-nine years, tells that when her daughter invited friends from the Hunters Hill Tennis Club to a sixteenth birthday party in the church hall, none of the girls who lived above Gladstone would come.

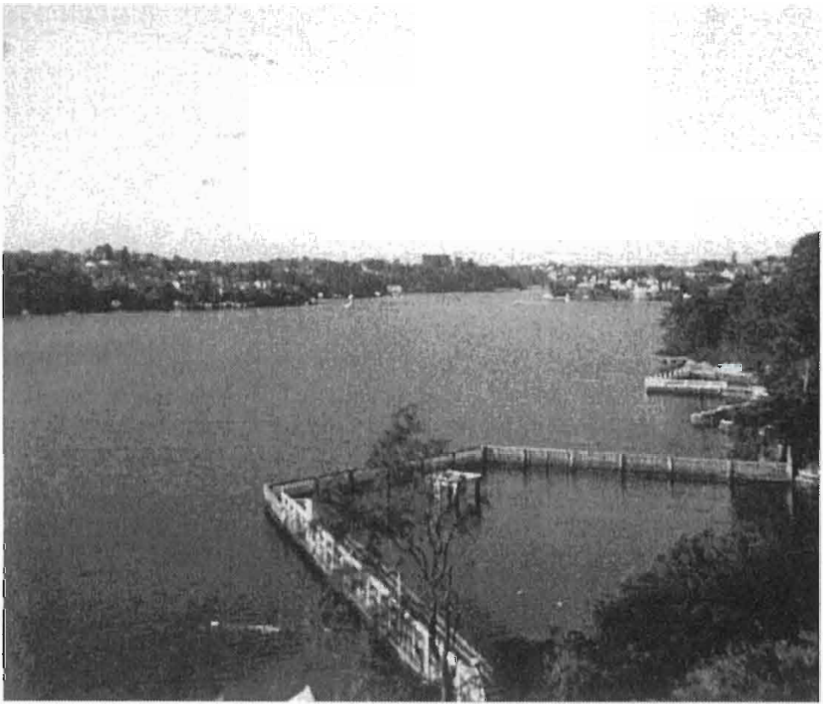
Later, when Alan Hunt's sons were the centre of a gang of boys who had glorious rock fights and raced old cars round parts of Kelly's Bush, few of the families from above Gladstone would join in. But such divisions seemed to be lost at the Baths and to be uncertain on the sports field. They were also dissolved by particularly kindly neighbours, like Jack Ramsay.*

Woolwich baths

Even ninety years ago the baths were the social centre for the young of all classes.

The land for the baths was dedicated in 1907, and originally there

*Mavis Coleman 1915 – 1994 lived in Woolwich nearly all her life. Her husband Tom was a dock-worker. Mrs. Coleman helped in the Ramsay household. In the 1960s the Colemans had to leave their rented house in Collingwood street. Jack Ramsay (the owner of a nearby waterfront property) went to considerable trouble to buy a narrow strip of land extending from Woolwich Road to Collingwood Street. He then made it possible for the Colemans to have a house on the Collingwood section. Jack Ramsay was born in 1884 in the Australian Museum, Sydney, where his father was Curator. He became a famous bird photographer, and his encouragement helped the Coleman's son to become a biologist and author of many popular books on marine creatures.



Woolwich Baths as they were in the 1960s. There was a diving board on the island platform (photo, undated, Hunters Hill Council, engineer's department).

was a diving tower, a turnstile and a charge for admission.[6] Gracie Nichols, one of the few of the Edwards clan to still live in Collingwood Street, tells that she was the only girl who loved diving from the top of the tower. The caretakers included Mr.Gale from Collingwood St. and after him, Mr Mooney. In the winter Mr.Mooney earned his living as a taxi driver so that he could spend the summer in a dilapidated tent beside the baths and support himself on

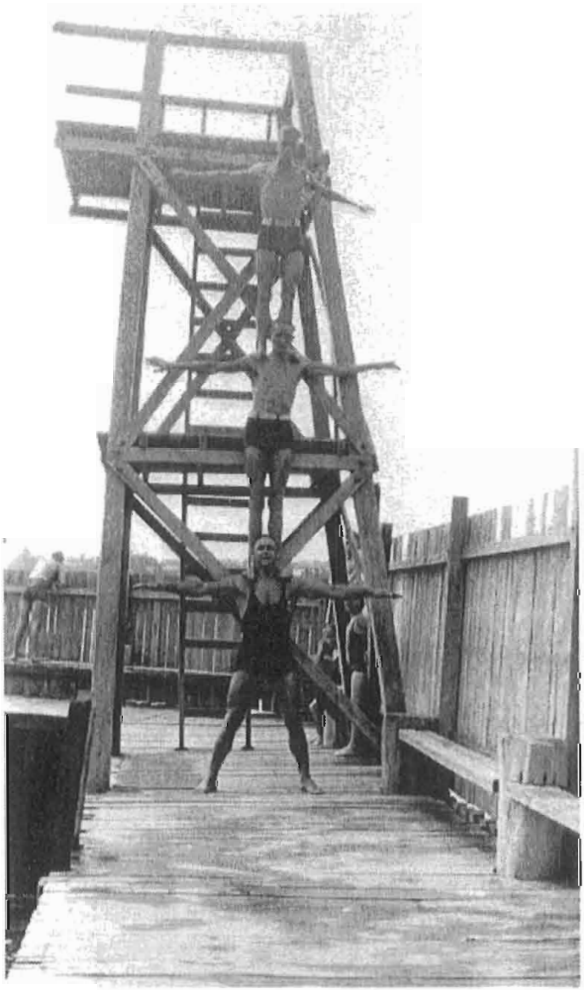
the takings- sixpence for adults, a penny for children and threepence for the hire of an old tyre, for floating. When a high tide was coming in the water was almost clear, the fence was almost shark-proof and the mud almost covered. Mothers could talk while children played. Ear and eye infections from Mooney's Mudhole contributed nicely to the summer income of the local doctor, but the families kept coming. The much-loved Mr Mooney knew several generations of most of the local families, and was a recognised part of the social cement.

Many games revolved around the high dive and springboard. Vincent Kelly, one of the sons of a large catholic family in Elgin Street, was known as an expert diver and this may have helped save his life when later, as a riveter, he fell off the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

When Mr.Mooney was very old his place was taken by his younger brother, Mr.Mooney number 2. then Mr.Mooney number 3.

Sports teams

There was clearly some social mixing of the classes, even outside the baths and the church congregation. In sport, this may have changed over the years, and I have not tried to trace the families of the sportsmen in detail, but the easily accessible records show that, for instance, the president of the Woolwich Cricket Club, which was already having its fourth AGM in 1902, was the son of Mr. Edgington, the former managing director of the Atlas Engineering Company and owner of a fine stone house. Mavis Coleman's notes show that a generation later at least some of the members of the cricket and rugby teams were from the working class families. By that time the Woolwich teams had merged with Hunter's Hill.



Diving tower at Woolwich Baths, probably before World War 2.

Cricket and football may have been more inclusive than rowing, which in the early days seems to have been mostly a gentleman's sport. An eighty-year old recalls reading that labourers were not welcome in the Balmain Rowing Club. They then tried to set up their own Working Men's rowing club, but the application was refused by the central body, on the grounds of unfair competition. Gentlemen would have been at a disadvantage against those brawny arms, used to hard labour.

Ferries

Ferries were an essential part of working, school and social life. They took Woolwich workmen to Cockatoo Island, to Mort's at Balmain and to the naval dockyard at Garden Island. They took men women and children to schools, offices and factories in the city and brought batches of workmen from Mort's to Woolwich.

In the 1920s and 1930s there were eleven wharves in Hunters Hill, all built and maintained by the Council, as well as private wharves belonging to the smelter and the dock. On the Lane Cove River run, ferries picked up at the Figtree, Mount, Alexandra, Mornington and Valentia Street wharves. On the Parramatta side there were wharves at Henley, Huntley's Point, Herberton, Mount, Ferry and Margaret Streets. [7] Each wharf had its own set of regulars and its own set of stories.

Until the wharf closed in 1947, the ferry at Margaret Street was one of the district's most important transport links with the city, and its wharf had the strongest links with the Woolwich schools and the smelter. People from both Hunter's Hill and Woolwich used tracks across the smelters' land to reach the wharf. Everybody walked. Boys cheered or whistled at the nuns running down from the convent in flying habits, and celebrated when a man who lived nearby in Margaret street, and who always delayed till the last moment, jumped into the water instead of onto the departing ferry.

Tales are told of the wonderful wildflowers which once grew in the bush, especially flannel flowers, but people who came to Woolwich in the fifties were too late to see them. Perhaps the walkers had picked them all, or the smelters had burned too frequently. Before the war the tracks were firmly closed for one day each year, to maintain the Kelly's property rights, and then there were many complaints about the detours making people late for work by missing the ferry.

Even though services had been much reduced by the fifties, the ferries were still the usual way for people to get to town. Regular travelers claimed particular seats, which they shared with friends. Special ferries took men to Cockatoo Island and back and forth to Mort's at Balmain. An early conductor of the Sydney Symphony orchestra had been known to announce, at the end of a concert and before the encores, "We will now wait for the Hunter's Hill crowd to leave to catch their ferry, before proceeding with the next item".

Recognition of the important role which the ferries had played in the local community may have prompted two generous citizens, the Berricks, to donate the funds needed for the construction of the turning circle at the Valentia St.wharf in 1967. A plaque stands in the garden at the centre of the circle.

Schools

From time to time a number of small private schools operated in the district, and their history has been recorded elsewhere.

Woolwich Public School was built just a few years before the smelter. Its early records, to 1939, are to be found in the State Archives. Most of the bundle deals with offers of land, quotes for buildings or repairs, and Council bills or receipts for collection of toilet pans, but some reports of inspections, official enquiries and applications for leave are included.[8] The school's early history was chequered, with great fluctuations in expectations, attendance, reputation and state of repair.

A few hints of an early teacher's life emerge. The lady teachers at the school were always assistants. Because there were so few occupations available to women and so few documents about their working lives in Woolwich, some of the official snippets from the teachers' school lives seem worth recording.

Getting started, keeping going

With an eye to increasing the population and enhancing property values, four aldermen, Mayor Jeanneret and other citizens petitioned for a school at Woolwich in 1882. The application was rejected because only fifteen of the children named were of school age. This did not deter ambitious citizens from continuing to press the case, and to offer suitable blocks of land, mainly along Woolwich Road or Gale street. The site of the present pub was one of the parcels offered. One applicant stressed the proximity of his block to the "land proposed for boat sheds and public baths" at the end of Collingwood Street. A competing landholder claimed "the honour of personal acquaintance of the Minister for Public Instruction".

Records of the establishment of other schools show keen competition for the resources of the Department in the rapidly expanding and dispersed population. Demand was high because, since 1875, parents had no longer been expected to meet one third of the cost of school buildings. A petitioner at Bungawalbyn, a scattered population near Ballina, wrote in 1892 that *"If the Minister only knew the rate at which the population was increasing he would not hesitate... to grant our request. There are several women here who have children two at a time."* In 1893 another applicant from Buxton, near Picton, wrote of the proposed school *"We want it badly enough as none of the girls are going to school yet owing to the nearest school being so far away & there being so many tramps on the road that it is really unsafe to send the girls. Three of the boys go to Balmoral but it is too far, they have over ten miles a day to walk."* [9]

One inspector was still hesitant about the needs of Woolwich, but by the end of 1888 the site at the top of the hill, at the corner of Gladstone and Woolwich Road had been chosen. The memo states that "as this is a choice site, the exact position of the building should be fixed by the *Architect* (Chief Architect of Schools) and *Chief Inspector*".

Much argument followed about the design, and the advantages of having light and ventilation from both sides of the main classroom, as against one solid wall to facilitate extensions. The future extension of the school and of the district was still uncertain. Construction of the original buildings began in 1892 and by the end of January in the following year 71 pupils were enrolled.

Some people attached to the Department had unshakeable faith in their mission, which included the principle that Australian children in public schools should learn to appreciate Australian native plants. Within a year or so, a memo to the Technical Education branch noted that *"the play ground of this school is very pleasantly situated on the banks of the Lane Cove river. It has many natural*

advantages - well drained and sandy soil, suitable for floral culture, patches of rock well adapted for fern culture; there are also about thirty indigenous shade trees, chiefly stringybark..... On the northern and eastern sides I suggested the planting of figs, ficus australis, tristanias, acacia pycnantha and other quickly growing and umbraceous trees; along the front of the play ground a belt of trees to form an avenue with those already planted in the street".[10] These trees were presumably some of the Norfolk pines cut from Woolwich Road in the 1920s to make way for electric wires and poles. Native trees, shrubs and other plants were dispatched to the school by J.H. Maiden, Director of the Botanic Gardens, who was tireless in educating young and old about native vegetation.

Sometimes there were sudden drops in enrolment, as when the reputations of competing schools soared, or the Atlas Engineering Company, which had been set up at Clarke's Point ten years earlier, closed in 1898. Some students were lost to the Marist Sisters' College when it opened in 1908. Others went to small private schools in Woolwich or Hunter's Hill. In 1909 there were only 50 children left, and none above third grade. The head teacher complained of unfair competition by Greenwich Public School, because travel by ferry was so "affordable and convenient". Inspectors investigated and found that "although the headmaster at Greenwich had been active in making the upper part of his school attractive, his actions had been quite legitimate".

Sufficient local allegiance remained at Woolwich to keep the school open. In 1910 the Rector of St John's requested provision of a flag pole so the school could fly a donated flag coming from the original Woolwich, a working class dockyard district near London.[11] However a few children continued to prefer Greenwich, which offered a greater variety of activities. Kath Christie, now nearly ninety, took a ferry from Gale Street to Bay Street, Greenwich, and walked up the hill to the school. Other children increased the enrolment at Woolwich by coming from further up the peninsula, in Hunter's Hill.

Extensions to the buildings followed slowly, generally years behind demand. In 1933, for instance, when there were still only two teachers in the school, there were 62 students in the combined 4th, 5th and 6th classes, but only enough desks in the main classroom for 52. The rest had to go into the infants' room.

While attendance in the early years fluctuated, the need for repairs was unrelenting. On two occasions the lead from the ridge capping was stolen during the Xmas holidays, allowing rain to soak the walls. Gutters rusted and clogged, termites ate the wooden fences and the floors beside the earth closets. Driving rain penetrated the walls and the Department usually had few funds available. In 1932 the P&C committee requested installation of electric light "for the convenience of their meetings" but the request was only granted on the condition that the P&C paid for power and installation. A request by the headmaster for a single power point for the use of the two teachers was refused. Perhaps because of pressure from the P&C, buildings gradually improved, culminating in the fine new kindergarten building of the 1960s.

Students, in and out of school

Former students who are now in their fifties or sixties recall being happy at school, and sufficiently well prepared for competitive secondary schools. Some were especially happy when playing in "the bush" towards the river. After school there were plenty of local places for cubbies and plenty of bush to play in, either on the foreshore or in Kelly's Bush itself, for those who were not deterred by ticks.

Older students could go prawning or fishing and many families had a dinghy. Margaret Berney, who started school in Woolwich more than sixty years ago, tells of rock pools with many small fish, mussels, oysters, cockles and sea slugs. They could even find sea horses in the water. It was easy to catch blue swimmer crabs with meat on

a string, and a photograph shows that a single crab would have made an ample meal. Like many people, Margaret's family, the Stranges, grew vegetables, kept chooks and went fishing. They kept a cow in front of their house, on the reserve which is now the park by Valentia street wharf, bordered by the cream of waterfront residences. The shellfish colonies, almost invisible for decades, are now slowly returning as river pollution is reduced.

Pat Porteous (n. Joiner), who attended the school from about 1937, thinks that it may have been one of the first to experiment with integration of handicapped children. Her younger brother, who had Down's syndrome, was accepted into the kindergarten class - if only for a year. David drove his push-pedal car from their parents' home near the point, about a mile away, but Pat had to help by pulling him up the Marist College hill and chasing him down on the way home. Children were expected to walk, and the bus was only for very rainy days. During the war students also exercised themselves by helping to dig trenches in the school yard and by practising air raid drill. Rubber pegs between the teeth were favoured in case of explosions.

By the fifties, at least, the public school was a good mixing pot. Many children from outside the village area attended because parents liked the school grounds or the teachers or the atmosphere. Children from Cockatoo Island and Goat Island came by ferry and walked up from the Margaret Street wharf. After the wharf closed in 1947 they were brought by special launch to the wharf at Gale Street, and collected again in the afternoon. Local small children might assemble to see them depart.

The teachers

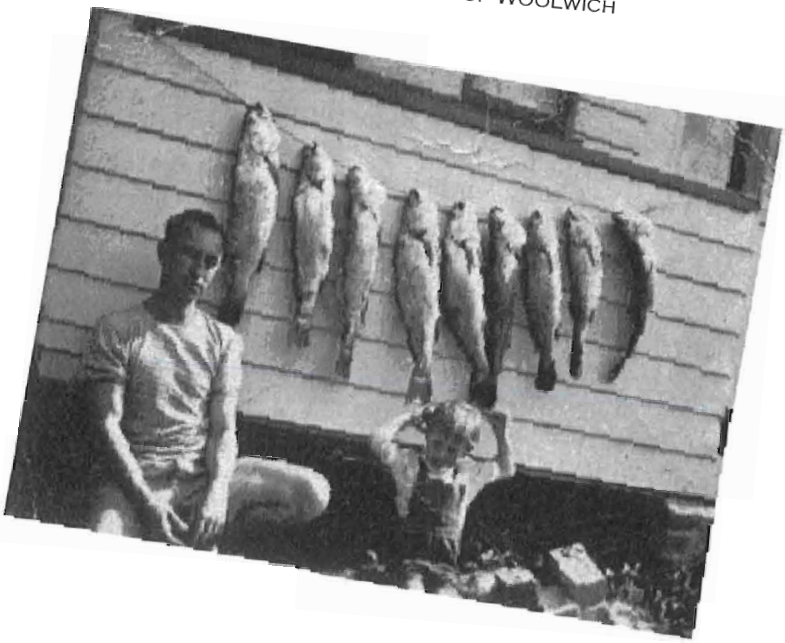
The early teachers were not always so happy. Pay was low. There were the much-feared Inspectors, with their rigid schedules for proficiency, and the Department, demanding desperate explanations for any requested leave of absence. The assistant lady teachers

Gardening at Greenwich Public School c.1910. Greenwich was a rival school, accused by the headmaster of Woolwich Public School, 1909, of poaching pupils by excessive zeal in providing extra activities for pupils at Greenwich. The total enrolment at Woolwich at this time was reduced to fifty, mostly very young students. (photo, NSW Department of Education)

seemed specially vulnerable. One died of pneumonia, almost on the job, in 1897. In 1900, the year of the plague in Sydney, Miss Brida N. requested leave because her sister remained seriously ill, her mother's health had broken down under the strain of constant nursing, and she herself had done nursing duties at night for two weeks ..."*but assistance is now urgently required during the day*". The accompanying doctor's certificate endorsed the request "*as it is*

Snapshot Album

Riches from the river about 50 years ago. Above right – Bob Strange with a day's catch from river waters. Top – a family friend shows what could be done with a piece of meat on a string near the wharf – two large crabs.



almost impossible to get a nurse, so much sickness being prevalent".

An extra hazard could be the head teacher's wife, who was expected to teach sewing (only), but could regard herself as an empress. This lead to a young assistant needing leave for "nerve exhaustion", and the continuing disputes resulted in a departmental inquiry and reprimands all round.

Teachers, 1892 - 1962

This list was supplied by the Department of Education and Training. No women were listed.
Wm. Small, 28.12.1892 - 14.1.1897.
Fredk. Campbell, 14.1.1897 - 8.1906
Henry Thomas, 12.1909.
Thos. Miles, 3.5.19 - 15.11.19.
Thomas Ousby, 3.12.31 - ret 23.6.41.
Arthur Holmwood, 4.9.42 - 3.11.42.
Stephen Collier, 3.11.42 - 31.3.43.
Harry Ferguson, 2.2.43.
Maurice Guiller, 2.2.54 - 2.55.
Thomas Gleeson, 2.55, ret.
Bill Brown, 30.1.62.

The end of Woolwich School

The post war group of children grew up and departed. The smelter and the dock closed. Some old cottages were demolished and replaced by parks or home units or more expensive houses with few children. The school-age population declined and the school closed in 1988. The site is now being developed as an aged care facility.

Marist Sisters' College and the Catholic community

The neighbouring Marist Sisters' College is still flourishing because since 1964 it has been a regional high school, attracting many students from other districts. The school opened in 1908 with land and a large house which had belonged to the Usher family. In contrast to the pans in the public school, the fine old house had a flushing Royal Doulton toilet bowl with chrysanthemums enamelled inside.

Eight students from Woolwich Public School moved to the Marist College in its first year and it remained an option for girls from both Catholic and Protestant families. Some Catholic children attended the Villa Maria Parish School, which was a few miles away and not an integral part of the Woolwich social scene.

In many communities in the early part of the century, there had been strong social divisions between Catholics and Protestants, but by the fifties, at least, such divisions were not important to many people in Woolwich or Hunters Hill. A newcomer after the war remarked that whereas in Morpeth Catholics and Protestants kept to their own sides of the street, residents in Hunters Hill even attended events in each others' churches. However, some people remember that a proposal to convert a large waterfront property in Woolwich into a retirement home for nuns was resisted by local land-owning Protestants.

Alan Hunt, an Anglican, tells the story of his youngest son Malcolm, a dashing lad who liked to jump off the fence of the Woolwich baths and swim over to the Marist Sisters' College, where he was a great favourite with the girls. Later, he drove fast cars. When he had a serious crash and was laid up in the Nepean Hospital the Mother Superior gave the girls a special afternoon off, so they could take a train to visit him.

The Industries

The schools, shops and other parts of the social scene were visible to all, but few people except the insiders actually knew what went on in the larger industries which gave the district its real character. Locally, working women were almost invisible. As a micro-industry, Mrs.Coughlan starched collars in the copper standing in her back yard in Collingwood Street. Some of the younger women worked at shops or factories in the city, but most of the married ones stayed at home, keeping the peace.

Although industrial Woolwich was a man's world it was not easy in 1999 to still find men who had worked in the smelter or the Woolwich dock. Alan Hunt, the last manager, thinks that at eighty-one he is the only survivor from the smelters. Keith Murray, also eighty-one, briefly managed a few projects at the dock, and Isadore Wyner, now eighty-three, worked there occasionally after the war. Issy is best known as an official of the Painters and Dockers Union, and as long-time alderman of Leichhardt Municipal Council. Issy worked for Mort's for about five years from 1946, and was sometimes part of a contingent drafted for the Woolwich dock. He has written a history of his union from 1883 to 1900, *With Banner Unfurled*, and the conditions under which he worked have clear historical connections with those of earlier times. [12]

A number of local men worked at Cockatoo Island, and since it only closed in about 1988, twenty years after the smelters and thirty years after the Woolwich dock, some of its ex-workers are comparative striplings. Both Fred Stamp and Ross Gardner were apprentices there and spent most of their working lives in highly skilled positions. Their experiences are not typical of those of the Woolwich labourers. Other local men worked in the naval dockyards at Garden Island, especially after naval operations were transferred to Garden Island in 1933. The story of Cockatoo is not covered in this account of Woolwich, since it has been very well told by Jeremy in

Cockatoo Island: Sydney's Historic Dockyard. [13] However, it is sometimes interesting to compare Cockatoo's workplace relations with those at Woolwich Dock or the smelters.

Early Industries

An excellent and very thorough account of the history and cultural significance of the waterfront land later occupied by the Army was produced by DC Research, consultants to the Australian Property group. This report, for which circulation was restricted, will be referred to as "the Army report". It notes how the surrounding area was transformed from a quiet fishing and rural retreat, as a new industrial workforce became established in the 1880s. By the early 1890s Clarke's Point was occupied by the Atlas Engineering Co and the works of the Parramatta Steamship Co and the Lane Cove Ferry Co. A quarry operated nearby, behind the present home units in Franki Ave, and the stone was used for local building and harbour reclamations, even before the stone from excavation of Woolwich dock itself became available. Within a decade the Sydney Smelting Company, Colonial Oil and Mort's Dock and Engineering Company were all operating locally.

The journals of the Hunters Hill Trust and the standard histories of the district have given accounts of early chemical or waterfront industries, especially those associated with ship-building or repairs. Briefly, besides the boat-builders and repairers, there had been a very early copper smelter across the peninsula not far from Valentia St, and a factory for distilling tar, and later, for extracting radium, below Nelson Parade. [15]

Gale street Woolwich in 1947 looking towards the Pier Hotel, Woolwich. The Universal Woodworking Factory at the top of the hill has since been demolished.

Universal Woodworking Company

The Universal Woodworking Company, whose site has become Woolwich Lookout, opposite the pub, made laboratory equipment and other specialised products, and provided cut-offs for small boys. In the manner of the times, the manager, Mr.Lunn, lived nearby. The woodturners employed six men. Mr.Lunn's daughter Nell was the book-keeper, installed in an office with a roadside window through which she exchanged greetings with whoever was passing by. Nell deserves special mention because she seems to have been the only woman employed in the local industries. Like the pub, the

factory got the full blast of black air from the dock, in a southeasterly.

Lavers Manufacturing Company

One of the most interesting accounts of early industrial Woolwich was written by Dearman in 1969. [16] His father was the manager of the Lavers Manufacturing Company, which operated on the reclaimed waterfront land below the houses in Nelson Parade - better known for the radium company which later occupied the site. Lavers had an extraordinary range of activities for such a small plot. They distilled tar from the Mortlake gas works and made bitumen, anti-fouling paint, naphthalene and carbolic acid. They worked day and night for three months to make disinfectants against Sydney's outbreak of plague in the first few years after 1900. Although the cases of plague were closely clustered around places of work near the city and the waterfront (the source of infected rats) many fewer casualties were reported from Woolwich or Hunter's Hill, than from Balmain and the city around Sussex St. [17]

The Dearman family must have developed strong leg muscles, climbing up and down to their house at No.1 Nelson. Young Dearman, aged ten, often rowed his dinghy across Fern Bay to the Colonial Oil Company, to pick up broken wooden cases from the two-pack kerosene cans. At that time "oil" was delivered to Pulpit Point by boat, in two-pack four gallon rectangular tins, housed in hand-made wooden crates. The Dearmans used the broken boxes as fuel for their boiler, but intact kerosene cases made useful furniture throughout the country.

Considering the health hazards of distilling tar, and of putting out the fire when the whole works burned down in 1904, the much-publicised hazards of the radium factory which later occupied the site may have been quite minor, even if more persistent.

Radium Hill Company

In the 1950s few people remembered the operation and nobody seemed concerned about local radioactivity. It was vaguely recounted that during WW1 there had been a "radium factory" on a narrow strip of reclaimed foreshore land west of Kelly's Bush. The product was said to have been used for painting luminescent numbers on watch faces. More detailed reports tell a different story.

Dearman writes that the Radium Hill Company, which mined carnotite ore at Radium Hill in South Australia, established a processing works to extract radium from the ore at Nelson Parade in about 1909. Keith Dreverman, whose father was the engineer in charge, says that the company imported pitch-blende from Spain, and used the uranium ore from Radium Hill only as a flux, which was roasted with pitch-blende and salt cake. (Pitch-blende was the material from which Marie Curie extracted her radium.)

In 1913 the purified radium was examined and approved by Rutherford, the famous physicist at the University of Manchester. At that time, radium was used in the treatment of cancer. Small amounts of radioactive material were enclosed in hollow needles made of gold or platinum and inserted near the tumour.

Luminescent paint *was* made from uranium compounds, but not locally. Keith Dreverman recalls that a uranium compound which was one of the company's by-products was sold to a watch-making company in Germany. When sales of the by-product ceased in 1912 the company could no longer remain profitable. It became insolvent in about 1916, and not much notice was taken of the land for about fifty years.

Early public health authorities had no easy way of measuring the alpha radiation which later became the cause of concern, especially after the old houses were replaced by more pretentious establish-

ments. Then, after the residual danger was recognised, the contaminated soil was collected and placed on one block, from which the public was excluded. The shadow of radioactivity fell over the whole area, including Kelly's Bush, which had its own, but much lower, levels from the smelter residues. Public perception of the shadow, even if misplaced, helped to save the bush from developers.

Mobil Oil Australia

In 1895 the Colonial Oil Company set up a depot at Pulpit Point, on land which had been the site of the Fern Bay Pleasure Gardens, about half a mile upriver from the smelter site. It was taken over by the Vacuum Oil Co in 1907 and the company later became Mobil Oil Australia. It negotiated its withdrawal from Pulpit Point from about 1985.

Pulpit Point is not part of "the industrial village" but some of its workers lived in Woolwich. Two of the night watchmen were our neighbours. There was also cross-over in the other direction. Some of the workers at the smelters, Mort's dock or Cockatoo lived on the Hill, and travelled to work or wharf by foot, bicycle, bus or car, according to the custom of the time. The question arises as to why, if Hunter's Hill had its own waterfront industry and workers, there was no part of the Hill which had the same strong and self-identifying character as industrial Woolwich. Perhaps the modest working men's cottages were more widely dispersed and thinly spread amongst the grander houses of Hunter's Hill. As well, the oil company had its greatest expansion after the 1950s, when cars became much more readily available. By this time, and for the same reason, Hunter's Hill was once more becoming recognised as a most desirable suburb for well-to-do people. The years when the suburb was a retreat for artists and poorly-paid academics were closing in, and there was no longer any chance of a real working class area developing.

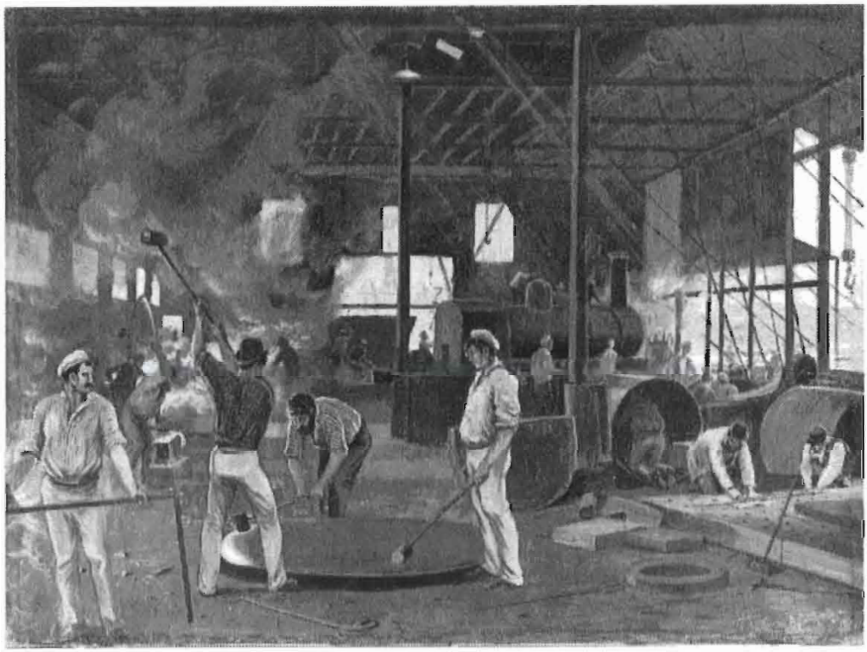
Especially after the fierce and potentially disastrous fire swept the Mobil site in 1964, the company was willing to improve its local image by contributing to local good causes, such as a new encyclopedia for the Woolwich school library.

Woolwich Dock

When the Atlas Engineering Co closed in 1898 the Clarke Point site was sold to its former rival, the Mort's Dock and Engineering Company, which was then the most important engineering firm in New South Wales. The Woolwich dock was a subsidiary operation, without its own separate employment or continuing management, but it "consolidated the character of the southern foreshores of the Hunters Hill peninsula as a major industrial zone on Sydney Harbour".[18]

The original company had been founded by T.S.Mort in 1855 as a ship-repair and ship-building facility in Balmain. It survived through times of restricted port activities by diversifying into other types of heavy engineering, such as equipment for railways, bridges and mining. Its locomotives were slid down rails to barges which transported them to Darling Harbour. No suitable wharf was available near the rail tracks, so locomotives were pulled to land on logs.[19] Ship building must have seemed a comparatively safe occupation.

Business was picking up when Mort's acquired the Woolwich site as an adjunct to its Balmain works. Excavation started in 1899 and the dock was formally opened in December 1901. The first ship to enter the dock was built in Sydney and powered by coal from the Balmain mines. [20] By 1918 the dock had been extended to its present length, but extensions had required the closing of one road and the acquisition of the east-facing garden and orchard of the stone house which now stands on the corner of Franki. Part of the land was used to make Franki Avenue itself.



Workers at Atlas Engineering Company. 1881 at the company's Haymarker (Darling Harbour site), about two years before Atlas moved to Woolwich. Atlas was a leading engineering firm, and labourers at smaller firms probably worked under conditions like this well into the 20th century. Information about print courtesy of Kevin Leaman, Mitchell Library.

Preparations for excavation and general earth works around the dock site were done by William Solomon and his son. Horses pulled carts loaded with earth and stone, and were pastured on such parts of the horse paddock as had already been reclaimed from the river. Neighbours complained of the smell and the flies from the unstabled horses. [21] The Solomons built a number of houses and roads in the district, married locally and were active members of the com-

munity.

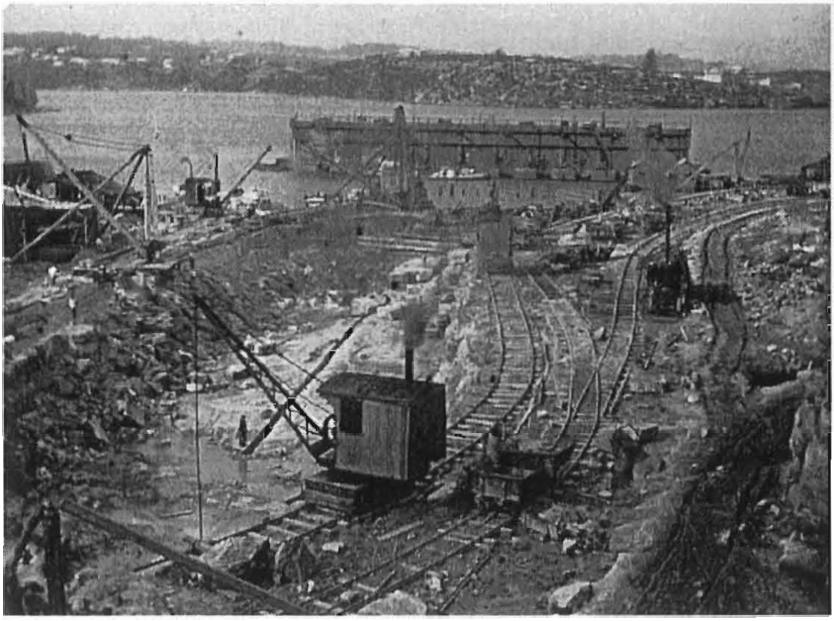
Until 1945, when it was surpassed by the Captain Cook graving dock of Cockatoo Island, Mort's was the longest dock of its kind in Australia. As well as the twenty acres or so of land previously occupied by Atlas, Mort's acquired extra land from the Clarke estate and reclaimed various pieces of waterfront land, some of it filled with spoil from excavation of the dock.

Fluctuating employment: the Depression

It has not been possible to find records of employment for Woolwich dock as a separate operation, or information about where the workers lived. By the early twenties Mort's owned thirteen houses and cottages near the dock, eight of them in the horse paddock, but nearly all workers seem to have come by ferry from the Balmain section on a casual basis, as needed. By 1906 the company employed nearly 900 people, reaching a peak of 1500 by 1917.[22] But there was no job security for the labouring classes in such a large enterprise. All over Australia, men who were laid off in the depression of the 1930s had to meet very onerous conditions before they could obtain a dole, or even a food ration.

One account of the times relates that "*In Sydney, for instance, vouchers for unemployment relief were handed out at booths near the ferry and tram terminals near Circular Quay, but to actually collect the money or goods the recipient had to go to Railway Square. Unable to afford a tram fare, a walk from Circular Quay to Railway Square was an arduous journey for a man who probably had walked all the way in to the city in the first place, was suffering from hunger and had little shoe-leather left.*" [23] There was also no money for rent relief, and neighbourhood opposition to evictions led to confrontations with the police.

Some of the men from Woolwich worked in "social service" road gangs, or were drafted to fill in swamps at Malabar. A local friend



Excavation of Woolwich Dock c. 1900. Note the "floating dock" (originally bought by Atlas Engineering Co,) in the background. After unsuccessful attempted sales the floating dock was taken to Mort's Balmain after WW1.

recalls the bitterness of her grandfather, who was paid for this work by food tokens only exchangeable for meat at a special depot. By the time he reached the top of the queue the meat was fly-blown. Other Woolwich dock families reverted to fishing, and their wives hawked the catch to the better-off households. Bitterness does not seem to have been expressed in a locally organised way.

The calamitous decline of employment during the depression did not last forever. The Army report emphasises that the level of activ-

ity at Woolwich dock had fluctuated through the years, the busiest periods being before the first world war, in the 1920s, and during the second world war, when the dockyard made a major comeback.

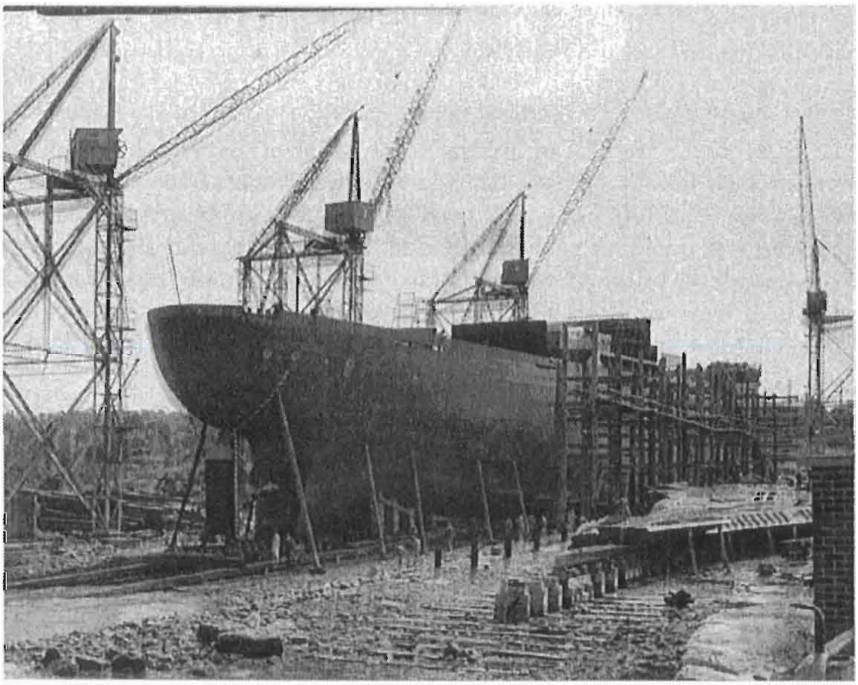
The ship-building section, above the "beach" at Clarke's Point, built a number of Sydney ferries before the first world war, but activity then declined. A few more ferries were built in the 1920s, but there was almost no further work until 1940, when berths were constructed for the hulls of two large cargo vessels, the *Boonaroo* and the *Baralga*. Costly delays in completion of these vessels were blamed on late deliveries of steel from BHP, bad management or demarcation disputes. Whatever the causes, the over-all operation weakened the company.

The docking, repair and building facilities of the whole company at both Balmain and Woolwich were fully engaged during the war years to 1945. A floating dock belonging to the UK Navy was also moored at Woolwich, but was not managed by Mort's. When ships were in the dock crews lived on board or gathered in the pub. Some children report being fearful when walking past the pub corner or through the dock area, on their way home from school, but other families welcomed the sailors and offered home-cooked meals. A few local girls married English servicemen whom they had met in this way.

"Floating docks" cause some local confusion. The floating dock which had originally been built by Atlas and converted by Mort's was transferred to Mort's Chapman site at Balmain after WW1. It appears as a large wooden island on some of the old photographs of Woolwich dock. The temporary floating dock in WW2 was strictly a naval operation.

Working at the dock

In the immediate post-war years, when Issy Wyner worked at



Ship building at Woolwich B class freighter on Mort's building berth (above what is now the beach at Clarke's Point) shortly before launching, 1950/51

Mort's, the labourers' jobs were still dangerous and dirty. When a large ship entered the dock for painting or repairs, rows of thirty foot punts were lined up on either side of it, and a hundred or so men set to work to scrape and prepare it for painting. When they had done the parts above the water line, pumps were turned on and the water level was lowered, exposing the next hour's work. This process might continue for about five hours, until the final water was removed and they could scrape the underside of the hull.

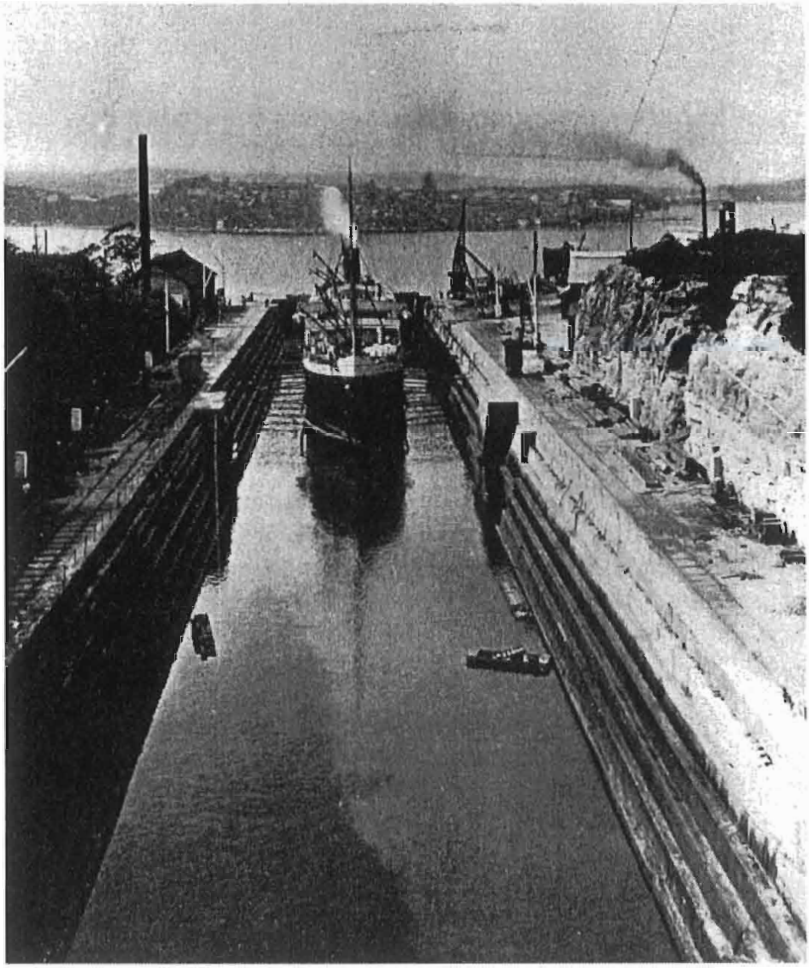
Fish trapped in the dock collected in the final pond and were eagerly caught or argued over by the dockers, who took them home for supper.

By the late forties, the union had a few ways of making the scraping process less hazardous. If the water was lowered too fast, so that they would have needed trestles on the punts in order to reach the highest parts, they threatened or called a strike for the rest of the day. They still had no control over poisons like the dust from the lead paint or other noxious chemicals, and, compared with current standards, limited control over the safety of scaffolding. Planks could break under the weight of too many men.

As well as scraping the hull, the painters and dockers would repaint the crew's quarters, the engine room and the steam pipes, all lagged with asbestos. Compensation for injured workers was low. Issy recalls that it was only about two pounds per week, which was about a third of the basic wage at the time. Negligence cases were almost unknown. The government set standard rates of fixed sum compensation for particular accidents - say, loss of a limb,- but there was no compensation for a chronic illness which might develop slowly, like asbestosis.

Little permanent work was offered to dockers at Mort's. A small contingent of "permanent hands" was employed on a weekly basis - mainly foremen or charge hands. The rest were paid off at the end of each job. After the war most of the men could expect to pick up another casual job fairly soon.

In earlier times and during the depression this had not been so. Men walked or took a ferry from one yard to the other in the hope of getting work, or sat around in the gutters, waiting for a pick-up. In 1945 the union introduced a roster system of unemployed members at its office in Mort Street Balmain, and the company called up the union when it needed another batch of men. The roster was based on the principle that "the longest out of work gets the first call for a



Woolwich Dock c. 1910. The punts in the foreground may have been used by dockers who cleaned the sides of the ship while the water level was being lowered

job".

As well as the large contingent of painters and dockers, ship repair needed a much smaller group of ironworkers and engineers of various sorts. There were also "professional painters" - members of a different union, restricted by demarcation rules to painting the passenger quarters only.

When work was over there might be a line of men queued up at the pub. Some even ran up the Goat Paddock and climbed over the stone wall at lunch hour. Since the only sort of beer served at the pub was "fighting beer", there could be trouble or danger on the punts in the afternoon. Other men had more peaceful occupations. Some brought fish traps and anchored them outside the dock.

Dock managers have other memories. Keith Murray, who has recently come to live in Hunters Hill, worked for Mort's for over fifteen years, and during the war he spent some time at Woolwich dock, converting two coastal passenger vessels, the *Arawa* and the *Westralia*, to armed merchant cruisers, each in the record time of three months.

Another outstanding job carried out at the dock was the rapid repair of the US Navy's supply ship *Althena*, torpedoed off Guadalcanal in 1942. A torpedo had gone through both sides of the ship, leaving a pair of holes big enough for a life boat to pass right through. The resulting strains bent the keel and the main shaft, but the ship was straightened by relying on the skills of the foremen, particularly the senior boiler-maker, Bill Northey, without recourse to conventional or Admiralty advice.

Like Alan Hunt at the smelters, Keith Murray was one of the old style managers who had grown up with the job. His father had worked in Mort's office at Balmain for fifty years, and Keith had spent school holidays learning the ins and outs of small steam ships even before beginning his apprenticeship and developing his skill at

Mort's. He placed great faith in the old engineers' ability to smell and hear trouble brewing, as well as to watch it on the dials on which more academically trained engineers now rely. Because of his recognition of the skills of foremen he was able to organise unorthodox and very rapid wartime repairs and conversions. He left Mort's in 1949, partly because of unease about the new management styles. Bad management was reported to be one of the causes of the eventual failure of the company.
Dock activity decreased throughout the fifties. Black smoke became less frequent. Operations at the dock ceased in 1958 and the entire company went into liquidation soon after. Seven hundred men lost their jobs.

Sydney Smelting Company

Now we come to the Woolwich Smelters, whose story has not previously been publicly recorded. Most of the "insider" tales come from Alan Hunt, whose wonderful memory was the starting point for this venture.

Establishment of the smelter

The Sydney Smelting Company (SSC) operated on the flat land on the Parramatta side of Kelly's Bush. The brass plaque on the lookout above the site says "The site was purchased by Mr.T.H.Kelly in 1892 for a tin smelting works", but the accessible early documents tell a slightly different story, which links the smelter to its past in Pyrmont, and draws attention to the history of Australian tin mining and to the booms and busts of the 1880s and 1890s.

Tin had been discovered in NSW in the 1840s, but disregarded during the gold rush. The tin rush began in the 1870s. Mining communities prospered in the New England district of NSW and a little later in North Queensland and Tasmania. For about a decade Australia was the world's largest tin producer, contributing about a quarter of the world total.

The Department of Mines, NSW, 1880 reported that "improvement in the price of tin has had a beneficial effect upon our tin fields ... with increased output and discovery of new deposits".[24]
The ore was crushed and concentrated at the mine before being sent to a smelter. In the early days there were a number of small local smelters near the mines, but only the Sydney smelters at Woolwich and Alexandria survived far into the twentieth century.

In the 1880s and 1890s two tin smelters had operated in the Pyrmont district - the Australian Tin Smelting Company, on the west side, [25] and the Pyrmont Tin Smelting Company, which later became the Sydney Smelting Company, managed by George Latta and owned by Thomas Hussey Kelly.

The works were at the end of Edwards Lane, towards the city and near the site of the present casino.[26]

In the mid-eighties Pyrmont was crowded and highly polluted. Although the production of tin ore had declined from its peak, prospecting continued and the future of tin smelting seemed assured. In 1883, nine years before the date on the Kelly's Bush monument, Kelly and Latta each bought a half share in nearly 16 acres of the Clarke estate, followed by transfer of rights of the Crown waterfront strip in 1884.[27] Most of the land was intended to act as a buffer zone between the waterfront smelter and the local residents.

In 1892 a further acre or so of reclaimed land was bought and the whole parcel was transferred to a group of nine merchants, presumably to raise money for building the works.[28] The first mention of the smelter in Woolwich in Sands directories is in 1896, but it may have begun operation in late 1895, which would be consistent with Dearman. [29]

In the twelve years since the original land purchase, the conditions in the colony had changed from boom to bust and the economic prospects for tin, in particular, were much less bright.

In the 1880s the country had opened up, as part of the pastoralists' land became available for industrious settlers leaving the goldrush, and the infrastructure for transporting wool and wheat to the UK was developed. English banks were very ready to lend money, and the result was a lively land boom.

In NSW the railways were extended south to Albury, west to Narrabri, and, importantly for tin, north to Glen Innes. The Australian Gas Light Company established itself at Mortlake and the city grew.[30] Deep water frontages, such as those at Woolwich, were vital to the industries which needed the river for transport. Establishment of a smelter at Woolwich must have seemed like a great investment.

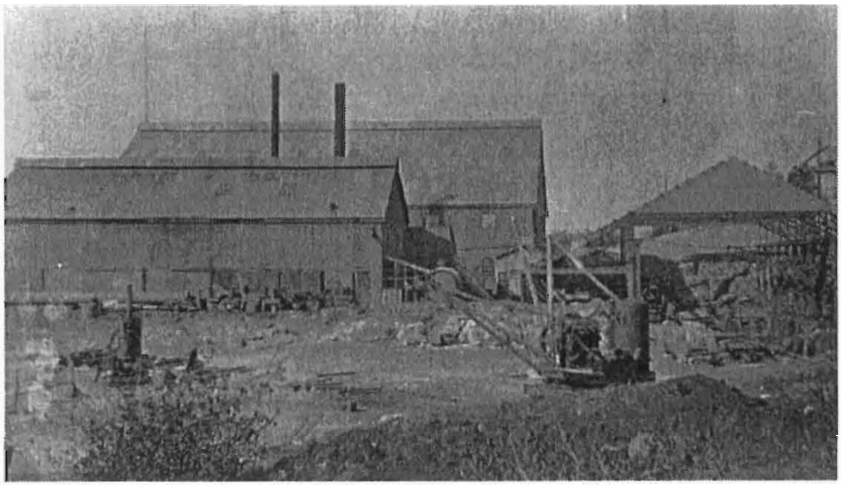
Then in the nineties the price of wool and wheat fell, English investors became anxious about their money and the "land banks" collapsed. Drought in NSW made matters worse. The tin industry was also affected, though for different reasons. Production of tin ore in NSW had peaked sharply in the early eighties, and declined steadily thereafter. [31] The value of tin metal produced in the state fell by over sixty per cent over the decade from 1883, when Kelly had purchased the Woolwich site. [32] We have no record of why he decided to proceed with the new smelter, but the company survived.

By the time the smelter began operation in 1895 or 1896, Woolwich had become a much better established village. The pub, school and bakery were operating and the streets were lit by gas - at least in Hunter's Hill. The last of the three bridges connecting Ryde and Hunter's Hill to the city was nearly complete (Gladesville Bridge 1881, Iron Cove 1884, Figtree 1885) [33] though all heavy goods still came across the Harbour and the rivers.

Cockatoo Island Average number of employees per year Records not readily available before 1913. Since then the number of employees has varied greatly from year to year. Reprinted with permission from Cockatoo Island: Sydney's Historic Dockyard, John Jeremy, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998

Workplace relations.

The workplace relations at the smelter were probably quite different to those at the docks. Employment see-sawed at Mort's, and the accompanying graph shows the fluctuations at Cockatoo Island, which had a peak employment of over 4,000 at the end of 1919. [34] By contrast, the smelter workforce was quite small, and compara tively stable. It also had a much better safety record. Only about sixty or seventy men worked there in the fifties and sixties, and the manager, Alan Hunt, knew them all.



Sydney Smelting Company works, probably 1920 or earlier, when there were two small furnaces. Taking of photographs by employees was forbidden. Plans and records were kept secret. The site looked quite different when Alan Hunt joined the company in 1939 (photo, undated, Hunters Hill Historical Society)

Directors

There were three generations of T.H.Kellys directing the company, - Thomas Hussey, Thomas Herbert and Thomas Henry.

Thomas Hussey Kelly, 1830-1901, had made the family fortune. He arrived in Sydney from Ireland in about 1860 and worked his way up from clerk to woolbuyer, then to wool and produce broker and director of a large number of companies, including the Perpetual Trustee Company, Tooth's Brewery and the Bank of New South Wales. He had extensive interests in mining and was also Commodore of the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club.[35] Like other NSW mining magnates of the time, he opposed federation and favoured free

trade instead of protection, but he supported the Sydney Smelting Company by empowering his trustees to borrow up to ten thousand pounds from his estate, for continuation of the company.

His son **Thomas Herbert** (1875-1948) was the Kelly most closely associated with Kelly's Bush. He had been sent to Eton and Oxford, and picked up some knowledge of metallurgy on the way. He became managing director after the death of his father in 1901. The photographs held by Council and by the Historical Society show a thin-faced dour man, but the Australian Dictionary of Biography records that he was "a dashing young man", a fine violinist, a good linguist, a sportsman, married to an actress and active in politics. He helped to establish Koala Park at Pennant Hills and advocated the use of Australian plants and trees in town planning.[36]

Alan Hunt says that Kelly was a tough man, "who wanted two and six for each two bob's worth, but a true gentleman", ready to listen to his workers and accept suggestions. He was a patriarch who paid above-award wages, and expected extra-award work. A more detailed account of the smelter operation deposited in the local library gives an account of a union inquiry into wages and conditions. [37] In Woolwich the smelter workers regarded themselves as a rung above the dock workers.

Old maps of what is now Weil Park, named for a mayor, show the area as "*T.H. Kelly's cricket field*". For one pound a year the field was let to St.John's Church, for the use of the local cricket and football teams.[38] Since the field needed levelling, the smelters provided ashes and Mort's Dock gave materials and labour to re-lay the pitch. For one shilling a year, if demanded, the Kellys also allowed part of their land near Woolwich Road to be used for construction of a Scout hall.[39]

Thomas Herbert was succeeded by his son, **Thomas Henry**, also an accomplished musician. Thomas Henry sold out to a group of English companies in about 1950. He escaped the Sydney social scene by raising horses and cattle at Minto.

Managers

The Works Managers carried on, while owners changed.

In the depression, when the workforce at Cockatoo Island dropped to 500 from its peak of 4,000 a decade earlier, spare smelter workers were employed in building a large new house for the manager, at 2A Alfred Street. As well as a tennis court, it had a dairy, fowl yard and orchard to the west of the house. A slab of concrete from the dairy floor remains at the edge of Kelly's Bush and a dense mass of weeds has grown on the strip of land once cleared as a drainage ditch and protection from bushfires. The whole building complex is now demolished.

In the 1930s depression the tin industry recovered more quickly than some other parts of the economy. The product became more valuable, and total production over the 1930s was not a great deal lower than in the 1920s.[40] Cockatoo Island, by contrast, was deeply depressed right up to the outbreak of war in 1939.

Ritchie, who was works manager from 1926 to 1945, was known as a stern man. It was said that he could get blood out of one side of a stone and water out of the other. Even after the depression he continued to employ SSC workmen on non-smelting tasks such as his vegetable garden, chook yard and dairy. On Monday mornings a workman lit and maintained the fire under the laundry copper. On Saturdays, workmen rigged a sailing dinghy for his sons, in case they might choose to sail.

Later Works Managers, Niels Einersen, to 1956, and Alan Hunt to 1967, made fewer personal demands on the company's workforce - but by then, there were fewer unemployed men needing work. Both Einersen and Alan Hunt were promoted from chemist to works manger, so each man had a long and intimate acquaintance with the works and the workmen.

Alan Hunt had worked at the plant since 1939, except for a few years as ore-buyer in North Queensland. The manager needed to know every aspect of the work, which was part science, part craft and part personal relations. Alan Hunt knew what each man or group was meant to be doing. Except for the shifts on an operating furnace, the tasks were too varied for a repetitive daily routine. The fashion for instant managers, armed only with an MBA and expectation of high pay and brief allegiance, had not arrived.

Workmen

From the fifties the smelter workforce varied from about 60 to 70 men. There were no women. In Alan Hunt's time very few workers were fired, though a few had to accept an option of resigning after repeated or serious breaches of conduct, like drinking or fighting on the job. One man working on the tracks had filled his black tea billy with port, and was strongly encouraged to resign. Many men stayed for all their working lives. Jim Canning, who lived in Alexandria Street, refused to leave at 65, though he was too old to continue as a furnaceman. He was kept on as a gardener, always winding back his age. In his eighties he made daily ferry trips to Head office, in town, to deliver the company records.

During Jim Canning's time at the smelter the whole district had changed from a rural retreat to a busy near-city suburb. One day Alan Hunt found Jim, whose family had run a local dairy, leaning on his shovel at the water's edge, looking across the river. "Not thinking of jumping, are you, Jim?" There had been an earlier suicide from the sea wall.

Concrete steps at the cliff face behind the former smelter site. These steps, near the smelter change room & air raid shelter, once led to a way up the cliff face used by smelter workmen maintaining the tracks through Kelly's Bush. The track was later closed by construction of a high Besser brick security wall near the edge of the cliff. The wall was installed after theft of valuable tin ingots, through the bush. (photo, A.E.)

"No, Alan, I'm just looking over at Drummoyne. To think we could have had the whole lot for two and six an acre - but it wouldn't have fed a single cow."

When the Woolwich smelter closed in 1967 and the company merged with other companies at Alexandria there was a strict provision by the new owners that all of the Woolwich employees were

to be dismissed, and not employed at the merged company. However, fourteen men followed Alan Hunt and smuggled themselves into the Alexandria workforce, where the relations between staff, management, unions and owners were quite different, and much less productive.

Smelter plant and process

There are few photographs of the smelter. The textbook of engineering metallurgy says that the process for extraction of tin from its ores has not changed fundamentally since the beginning of the industrial revolution, but competitive capitalist owners allowed no cameras inside the works.

Alan was not even allowed to take a snapshot of his own lab when he arrived as a young chemist in 1939.

There were two ninety foot chimneys for the furnaces, later extended another ten feet. A disused chimney from one of the original furnaces was also still standing. The roaster had a sixty foot chimney which twisted and leaned towards the river. Ferry passengers at Margaret Street placed daily bets on its imminent collapse, but it was still standing when the plant closed.

In summary, the ore was assayed, roasted to remove some of the impurities, smelted with coal and limestone and purified by bubbling air or steam through the molten metal. Further tin was recovered from the slag and other recycled products. Furnaces were lined with heat-resistant brick, frequently replaced or repaired. In early days they were mortared with clay from Kelly's Bush, and the small quarries can still be seen. Impurities went up the chimney or into the river. Supplies of ore were carried up the harbour by the company vessel *Casino* or its predecessors. Coal, limestone and all other supplies were also delivered to the company's wharf. The slag was taken away by barge and used to fill Drummoyne Point, Birkenhead Point and the Kelly's own waterfront at Double Bay. Later,

in the days of truck transport, it was used as road and land fill in Hunters Hill.[41] When no longer acceptable elsewhere it was piled at the site, and later covered with earth. Many lumps now protrude.

More details of the process, and of the post-war safety record, are available in a typescript deposited with the Hunters Hill Historical Society and the Ryde Library. A map of the lay-out of the plant in 1961 was included in a report by an industrial archaeologist, 1985, issued eight years after the plant had been closed and extensively vandalised. [42] A much more thorough account of a typical tin smelter is given in a technical publication by Australian Mineral Economics. [43] The authors note that the secretiveness of early owners stemmed from competition for scarce supplies of ore.

In a south or south easterly wind the bush acted as a partial buffer. A northerly wind blew the sulfur dioxide, arsenic, lead and coal fumes over the river to Cockatoo Island and Balmain. The copper impurities were made soluble by the roasting process, and went into the river. Their effect on shellfish is not recorded, but fish could still be caught from the smelter wall or from the rocks to the west. Contamination would have been difficult to detect by the analytical methods of the time.

At least one furnace was working at all times, on eight hour shifts, except for the Xmas break. The first ferry arrived too late for the first shift, so most of the men lived locally, or in Hunter's Hill. Some came by bicycle from Gladesville. For some years Joe Rostock, who later lived in Ady Street, Hunter's Hill, rowed over from Balmain in his own dinghy, with a lantern tied in front, watched apprehensively by his mates in stormy weather.

The only other tin smelter operating in Australasia during most of this century was O.T.Lampriere, which opened in Alexandria in 1928. When the SSC moved from Woolwich to Alexandria in 1967 it became part of a new company, Associated Tin Smelters, shared between SSC, Lampriere and Australian Iron and Steel. In October

1985 the world tin industry plunged into chaos and prices fell dramatically. [44] ATS struggled on for a few years, at less than a tenth of its capacity. High grade tin is no longer smelted in Australia.

The land was offered for development, but after a protracted struggle, led by the Battlers for Kelly's Bush and assisted by the Builders Labourers Federation, a large grant from the State Government and a hint of radioactivity in the slag piles, it became a public bushland reserve.

Community involvement

Clarke's Point

Now we come back to the Clarke land, which is often the starting point for histories of Woolwich. It was the scene of several battles for the survival of Woolwich waterfront industry. In the early 1960s Mort's planned to recoup some of its losses by selling the Woolwich land for a housing development, with ten storey tower units. At the same time the Maritime Services Board still had plans to develop Woolwich into a major industrial and port complex. At other times during the sixties there were plans by Allied Chemicals for the establishment of a bulk liquid chemical terminal, by the Australian National Line for "roll on, roll off" cargo berthage facilities, and by the Petroleum and Allied Chemical Co for oil storage facilities. All these plans fell through in the course of commercial and legislative negotiations.

Various branches of the State government had aims which were inconsistent with those of other branches, and this delayed the rezoning which would have been needed for residential development. Details of the legislative hurdles and the community reactions are

Tom Uren, Patron of the action group Foreshore 2000 Woolwich, addresses a meeting of residents in June 1997 outside the fence of the Woolwich Army land site. Mr. Uren is a former Minister in the Whitlam Labour Government.

described in the Army report and by Martin and Temple in their account of the first twenty years of the Hunters Hill Trust.[45]

The outcome was the acquisition of part of the land by the NSW State Planning Authority in 1971, and its transformation into Clarke's Point Reserve from 1976. On public holidays, sunny weekends and especially, Mother's Day, most of the people out of doors in Woolwich now come from communities of newly-arrived Austra-

lians in the western suburbs. The Army retained the dock, the goat paddock and the horse paddock, though horses and local pedestrians made frequent use of the land without being challenged. A local group, Woolpac, opposed the development of army houses on the horse paddock in 1985.

From now on?

At the time of writing the Foreshore 2000 Woolwich group continues to display remarkable energy in its campaign to have all the Army lands returned to public use. The Woolwich Aged Care Association has survived long and strenuous battles to save the old school site from less appropriate or private development. The Hunter's Hill Dramatic Society perseveres with theatre in the old St John's church, and the Friends of Kelly's Bush work to regenerate the land saved by the Battlers, but there are not many other signs of really local community action. Cars have expanded the boundaries of what can be considered "local" - it might now be the peninsula, the Municipality or the whole of Sydney.

When "thinking globally" is so strongly promoted it becomes more difficult to focus, as well, on "acting locally" with a sense of wider community values. Retrieving a small part of the local history may help.

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Selected dates

1834 Sale of Crown land, 8 lots covering most of Woolwich.
1855 Founding of Mort's enterprise at Balmain
1865 Parramatta Steam Co. operates ferry service
1871 Hunter's Hill & Lane Cove Steam Ferry Co begins
1880s "Tin rush" in NSW
1881 Gladesville Bridge opens
1882 Pyrmont Tin Smelting Co operating
1883 T.H.Kelly & G. Latta buy land for smelter in Woolwich
1884 Atlas Engineering Co.at Clarke Point
1884 Iron Cove Bridge opens
1885 Figtree Bridge opens
1891 Woolwich Pier hotel
1893 Woolwich Public School opens
1895 Sydney Smelting Co. begins operation at Woolwich
1895 Colonial Oil Co at Fern Bay
1898 Atlas Engineering Co sells out to Mort's
1899 Excavation of Woolwich Dock begins

1899 All Saints H. Hill acquires wooden church, Woolwich.
1900 Outbreak of plague in Sydney
1902 Mort's Woolwich Dock opens
1908 Last prisoners transferred from Cockatoo Island
1908 Marist Sisters' College opens for students
1908 Foundation stone of brick St John's Church laid
1909 Radium Hill Co on foreshore below Nelson Pde
1916 (approx) Radium Hill Co closes
1947 Margaret St wharf closes
1958 Woolwich Dock closes
1959 Mort's goes into liquidation, Balmain & Woolwich
1964 Fire at Mobil Oil, (formerly Vacuum Oil & Colonial)
1967 Smelter closes at Woolwich
1971 NSW Planning Authority acquires part of Clarke's Point
1971 First green ban, Kelly's Bush
1978 Hunter's Hill Town Hall & records burned
1983 State Government (Premier Wran) buys Kelly's Bush
1985 Mobil announces intention to quit Pulpit Point
1988 Woolwich Public School closes
1993 St John's Hall & Woolwich Scout Hall destroyed by fire

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