

**CHARLES HENRY DAVIS**

**GENERAL HOLMES**

**AND**

**A MAN CALLED**

**LEITCH**

General Holmes And A Man Called Leitch

Also by the same author

**Non-fiction books:**

Finding Frank

Remember Armageddon

Postcards from Prussia

**Short stories:**

The Red Resident of Sans Souci

From Where I Sit

The Meeting of Menace

**Poetry:**

Loss

Autumn

Love's Lament

Revelation

Sentinel

Torn

Reflection

## *Preface*

As the title suggests, this involves two men.

‘General Holmes’ should be recognisable to the residents not only of Rockdale but to Sydney as a whole (and perhaps further afield), for his name is associated with a main road connecting the city with its southern extremities (and beyond).

A man called ‘Leitch’ is, unfortunately, unlikely to strike anywhere near a similar chord.

Both however share a significant legacy resultant of their individual achievements.

With living relatives a possibility, an initial course of action was to allow for, not only input, but an opportunity to pay due respect.

As a result it would be remiss to not acknowledge those who responded, some of whom provided facts that could be included, but all of whom selflessly took the time.

Their involvement added a personal connection to both main characters, Holmes and Leitch, and an expression of gratitude is therefore owed to -:

*David Edwards*, whose father Frank was with General Holmes when he died, and who most graciously offered his father’s personal memoirs of that tragic event.

*Richard and Geoffery Travers* (General Holmes’ great grandsons), whose grandfather (Jack) married Holmes’ daughter (Dorothy Mabel). Geoffrey kindly provided relevant excerpts from his uncle’s memoirs; Richard kindly lent his ear to questions.

*Andrew Bell*, whose great-great-grandfather (2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Henry Green) was General Holmes’ father-in-law (Henry’s daughter Susan married the General, while a son – William Green – is Andrew’s great-grandfather). Andrew kindly sent detailed information that supplemented (to a degree) that already in the public realm regarding the General’s military and civilian careers; similarly *Peter Byrne* (no relation) of Sydney Water (formerly the Board of Water, Supply and Sewerage, to which the General was employed).

*Allan Edgar* (a very distant relation to General Holmes) and *Louise and Jenny Holmes* (whose father is the General’s great nephew, Bruce Theo McIndoe Holmes, aged 91 and ‘profoundly deaf’) all provided interesting family history, albeit unrelated to the overall subject matter.

*David Wilson*, no relation but who wrote about the General in his book the “Fighting Nineteenth”, (the 19<sup>th</sup> A.I.F. Battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in World War One).

To some dismay, the ‘man called Leitch’ generated minor response by comparison, save *Andrew Connor* (a distant relation) and (via an alternate request) *Naomi Crago* of City of Sydney Archives, who substantiated certain facts already obtainable from the news media of the period concerned.

- ~ -

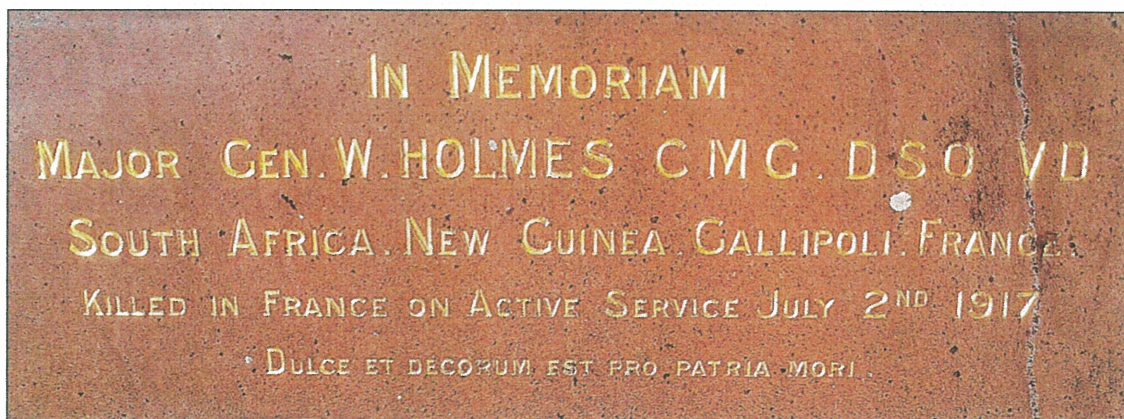


## *Remembrance*

It's the Saturday before Anzac Day, the day we commemorate those who have gone before us, those who have placed themselves in harm's way in war. In the morning newspaper there is an article reflecting on this need to remember and, in keeping with the subject matter, the journalist quotes a Latin verse attributed to the Roman poet Horace.

Before too long though the weekend gives way to another Monday afternoon, the long drive home and, for some of Rockdale's residents, the inevitable gridlock that finds them crawling from Botany towards *that* tunnel with *those* planes passing overhead, before exiting at Kyeemagh into seemingly evermore eye-glazing bumper-to-bumper irritation.

As cars edge closer to Brighton-le-Sands, drivers might take an occasional glance left over Botany Bay's glistening waters, gazing to where sky meets ocean, the horizon splitting north and south headlands. Between them and that overseas flight they may be daydreaming about is a gold-inscribed memorial plaque, set in a stone plinth approximately one metre high by one-and-a-half metres wide in dimension.



While these days it occupies a grassy triangular area at the southern end of General Holmes Drive, certain family folklore has it situated elsewhere before its relocation around 1954. According to a great-grandson's uncle's memoirs, the then-named Metropolitan Water, Sewerage, and Drainage Board took possession of this plaque from a bandstand which was demolished following vandalism in the early 1950's – it may well be a reference to a memorial that was located at Gladstone Park, Balmain.

Notwithstanding the likelihood, it is nonetheless a handed-down tale that is difficult to verify – not so however this memorial's bottom line '*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*' which, thanks to the weekend newspaper article, Monday's drivers can translate as 'It is sweet and proper to die for your country.'

Having ample time to read the remainder of the dedication, these same drivers may well ponder that which Ron Rathbone poses in his book, '*Brighton-le-Sands: The suburb that grew from the sand hills*' – just who was this 'Major Gen. W. Holmes' and why is a multi-lane road choked with twenty-first century traffic, a vital route either direction of the Bay Street intersection, named after him?



*A very different time*

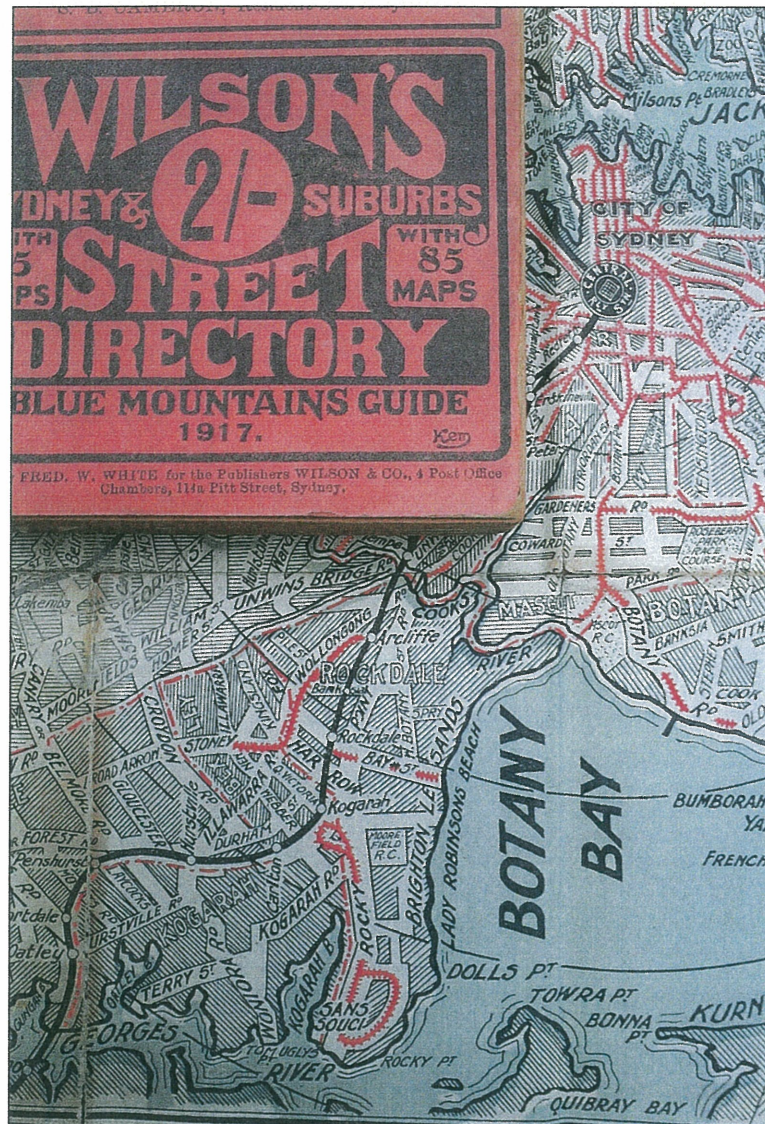
Before this 'important artery' (as urban planners may term it) came into being there had to be necessity because, as we are told, it is the mother of all invention.

*Someone* must have proposed a road to link one side of the Cooks River with the other. Ron Rathbone's book, while summarising the 'Major Gen. W. Holmes' of the memorial plaque, mentions nothing as to this other 'who': indeed, information on this 'who' is nowhere near as available or obtainable – but more on this 'man of mystery' later.

Meanwhile, some time travel to 1924, where '*Wilson's Street Directory*' is very much *the* street-finder of choice if these British Empire Exhibition medals are an indication.



Below is an earlier version of this directory. All that crosses Cooks River in 1917 is the railway to Rockdale and Kogarah, with (adjacent to the railway bridge) an encircled line perhaps denoting a punt (vehicle ferry) from Cooks River Road (partially covered by the superimposed front cover corner) to Rocky Point Road.



The tramlines of the time are denoted in red: Rockdale Station to Brighton Le Sands (no hyphens in the typeface), and Kogarah Station along Rocky Point Road to what was known as the ‘Sandringham loop’.

This directory also contains a summary of Rockdale – incorporated 1871; population 35,000; number of houses 7,000; miles of streets 105 – and provides the useful information that Ramsgate, Sans Souci, Sandringham, and Scarborough “although situated in the Rockdale Municipality, *are more easily approached via Kogarah.*”



Page 545 of this directory, in addition to any observation that 'trams are so last century', highlights a few other notable differences by comparison with 'today'.



In 1917 there is no road dedicated to the memory of General Holmes. The Grand Parade is bounded by Bestic and Bay Streets, and where the 'Drive' these days veers to the left off 'the Parade', back then there is Ross Street, parallel to The Avenue, which is in our time Moate Avenue. In addition (but not displayed here), north of Bestic Street towards Cooks River there are the remnants of what earlier locals may have referred to as 'the sewage farm'.

Where Rocky Point Road runs down to the Georges River baths there's even some indecision, with that section south of what forms a t-intersection with Sandringham Street titled 'Sans Souci or', and the road itself is yet to be realigned. That's some fifty years in the future with the construction of the Captain Cook Bridge.

And for no other reason than it being a matter of interest, that section of Rocky Point Road just south of President (bordering the Moorefield Racecourse), running up to Bestic?... it is not yet Princes Highway. That name change will occur after the 1920 visit of the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VIII.



One would also have needed an all-terrains vehicle to traverse Cook Park after turning right at Kendall, left at Napoleon, and right again and on to Sandringham Street from ... well, would you look at that, 'back then', as we like to say, Ramsgate Avenue is where Tuffy is now!

Selected extracts from a contemporary account of life 'back then' provide an idea of the relative isolation: "the Kurnell Peninsula was for the most part untouched; there was very little settlement on Cape Banks and La Perouse and few lights twinkled by night on that headland. To the north and south (of Brighton-le-Sands) there was an almost uninterrupted open space, some attractive, others not so, particularly the north for compelling reasons," (the sewage farm) "and if visitors wished to come in our direction, the majority had to travel by the Saywell Tram from Rockdale; actually it was the NSW Government Tramway, the Saywell franchise having expired around 1914."

Certainly, the demise of a family business is unfortunate, but this same year is far more notable for the tragedies that unfold from early August onwards after Great Britain (and by association and allegiance, Australia) declare war on Germany.

William Holmes, aged fifty-two, is already a long-term army man, having joined the N.S.W. Military Forces 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment as a bugler when only ten years of age. He was promoted to Lieutenant at age twenty-eight, to Captain four years later and, in 1900, to the rank of Major after having volunteered for service in South Africa's Boer War. Badly wounded in heavy fighting at Diamond Hill in the June of that year, his bravery is recognised through the award of the Distinguished Service Order, a Mention in Despatches, and further promotion to brevet Lieutenant Colonel.

Holmes (for over two decades) aligns his military service with employment at the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage. Five years prior to the Boer War he is the Board's Secretary and Chief Clerk (these days he might be called the Managing Director), a position he recommenced upon returning from South Africa whilst continuing as a citizen soldier, commanding the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Infantry (to 1911) before being appointed head of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade with the rank of Colonel (January, 1912).

The outbreak of hostilities in August 1914 quickly results in the formation of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force, (the AN&MEF). Tasked with occupying German possessions in New Guinea and the Pacific Islands, these men are provided just ten days to enlist and equip before leaving Sydney on the nineteenth with Colonel William Holmes in command – his transition from civilian life as Water Board Chief Clerk to Australia's first battlefield commander had been swift to say the least.

Reproduction of Australian War Memorial portraits of William Holmes are subject to copyright. One, from his AN&MEF appointment and which may be following the German governor's surrender to Holmes at Rabaul (New Guinea), has him seated almost casually in a high-backed wicker chair with an authoritative air of satisfaction, one leg crossed over the other, eyes firmly on photographer, a somewhat plump face dominated by a well-manicured bushy handlebar moustache, resplendent in white ceremonial uniform.

It's early September – the same month of Australia's first combat casualties in an escalating conflict that in time will be referenced by some as 'Armageddon'.

Holmes becomes territory administrator until returning home in January 1915. By this date other Australian troops (who had also left for overseas around the time he had departed for New Guinea) are by now in Egypt, thinking that they'll soon be in France, and certainly not a place few would have heard of beforehand.

On February 6, Holmes' AN&MEF appointment is terminated, but within a month he is again in command (with the rank of colonel), heading the newly formed Australian Imperial Force's 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade which, by the time it leaves Sydney in May, sees the word 'Gallipoli' beginning to feature in newspapers 'back home'.

His brigade forms part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, destined for where the mounting tally of dead and wounded is testimony to Turkish men and boys who will not be giving up their peninsular without a decent fight; come late August and Holmes' 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade are occupying trenches facing topography which others who had been there for an agonising four months refer to simply as 'the Nek'.

By now elevated to 'temporary Brigadier-General', William Holmes gains notoriety in wearing an overtly conspicuous red hatband whenever personally inspecting key sections of the battlefield. Despite his obvious high military rank to friend and foe alike, in placing his own welfare at considerable risk it's a selfless devotion to the cause, so much so that, when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's Major-General takes ill just prior to December's full evacuation, Holmes is acknowledged with the acting command.

By the following April the war is almost two years into its protracted attrition – now just five months from his fifty-fourth birthday Holmes is, along with his 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 'preparing' for the horrors they know are awaiting them in northern Europe. It isn't long before villages such as Pozieres (in August) and Flers (October) become seared in the memory – nonetheless, Holmes continues with a habit of making inspections and reconnaissance of battlelines whenever deemed necessary: following the nervous breakdown of the British officer previously in charge, Holmes is promoted to Major-General of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division in January of 1917.

In April this year (and after voicing his opposition to an operation that ultimately results in heavy losses for his men), Allied assaults move on from the village of Bullecourt to the surrounds of yet another small hamlet ravaged by the Western Front.

An in-depth account of what would be referred to by those who were there as '*Messines*' is readily available in any number of sources and is therefore at the reader's leisure: all will paint an uncomfortably vivid picture of the 'experience'.

These sources tell of men lying prone, tunnelling for months on end in hot, sweaty and claustrophobic conditions to underneath enemy lines; of nineteen underground mines that are exploded a few minutes after three in the morning on June 7; that, for about forty-five seconds, the largest man-made explosion in history (at that time) is heard in far-off London as a distant roar; and that (according to most estimates) some ten thousand German troops are obliterated in that very moment.

## General Holmes And A Man Called Leitch

These days, visiting these villages takes on a sense of religious-like pilgrimage, a 'wandering' in 'their' footsteps, awestruck by the beauty of the present, the unexpectedly cold silence of the nearby memorial grave sites, and photos from that time that tell, in all too graphic detail, of the horrendous damage inflicted on man and property alike.

Not too far north of Messines are the town of Ypres and its museum to the 'Great War'. These days one is fortunate enough to see the celebrated 'Great Cloth Hall' of medieval times in all the glory of its rebuilt state, and which the townsfolk of 1911 knew as the photo on the left that follows.

General Holmes (in the European summer of 1917 even though the photo is dated two years later) knew it as that on the right...



*Ypres' Great Cloth Hall (Belgium) pre- and post-World War One*

≈

Having a large majority of their best young (and not-so-young) men fighting for the good of the British Empire, the media 'back home' often recount to the Australian public the words of those far away, in harm's way.

In-between Gallipoli and the Western Front trenches, in the relative quiet of an Egyptian winter, William Holmes pens a letter dated January 27, 1916.

By March 10 it has found its way to a Sydney Morning Herald article wherein the "Brigadier-General", in "expressing his high appreciation of the efforts of the various organisations providing comforts for our soldiers", is further quoted as having "mentioned before how grateful we all are here for what has been done for us by the women of Australia (whose) army is the best paid, best fed, and best clothed thanks to our Government and the generosity of our citizens, particularly the female portion."

A while later Holmes is again featured, on this occasion from a letter he has forwarded to the parents of a fallen Captain: "it is my duty to tell you that your son acted in a particularly gallant way, and I am proud to have him under my command."



Moving on to March 1917, and under a column heading “General Holmes On The Referendum”, and in a reference to “the tactics adopted by the ‘Nosers’ to influence the women vote”, he is credited with saying “What awful ‘bosh’ to tell women if they vote ‘yes’ they are sending another woman’s son or husband to his grave!”

Further on, in describing the war conditions as “intensely strenuous”, the “wastage of personnel” as “great”, with himself being “at wit’s end” in “preventing evacuations from the front line”, the referendum’s conscription question (for the General) is not one of “forming new units”, but one of “sending sufficient men to help those already here by keeping the ranks of existing units reasonably full. We are in this show to win, and Australia cannot turn back.

The price in manhood is high, but the game is worth it.”

This comment reflecting on the ultimate cost of war will, in hindsight, appear to be somewhat prophetic in the most personal sense possible when, early in July of the same year, the N.S.W. Premier, William Holman, pays a visit to the Australian troops.

It would be too simplistic – and certainly irreverent, given the clear implication in the previous statement of what is to come – to state the obvious when a first-hand account from someone who accompanied General Holmes (and Premier Holman) exists.

By the good nature and permission of David Edwards, selected extracts from his father Frank’s account (in his capacity as “Private Secretary to W. A. Holman”), titled *‘My visit to the Australian section of the Western Front’*, follow:

“I had a very comfortable billet at First ANZAC in a cottage in the village. On Sunday afternoon we motored 80 to 100 miles to Second Anzac. It was a beautiful trip. Lovely gravelled roads through wheat fields; no fences, wheat right to within a foot or so of the car axles. The whole landscape was a waving green.

That night we had dinner with Major-General Holmes and his staff. They made a very happy gathering. I think we met more high grade actual Australian officers there than at any other gathering.

Next morning Mr. Holman and I started out for General Holmes’ headquarters, a mile or two off. After loading gas masks and steel helmets we set off on a big day’s programme. The sky was a real Australian blue. I counted nineteen observation balloons up.

First we inspected a model of Messines Ridge (which) to my mind was like the model irrigation farm at Sydney Showground. We (then) went a quarter of a mile further (on). Pretty quickly however a German shell landed fifty yards away in a potato patch. It blew clods and young potatoes up into the air and, when these landed all around us the General (Holmes) observed that perhaps we might move on.

We then turned right angles to the north and started to climb a hill. As we went (on) another shell landed about a hundred yards to the north of the last one (and) had the Germans landed their shells a little nearer the road, nothing could have saved the lot of us.

## General Holmes And A Man Called Leitch

We reached the top of the hill where the General decided that the party would alight and walk. (He) led the way to the front of the car, Mr. Holman practically beside him while I followed behind. Suddenly, Mr. Holman decided to swap his cap for his hat (and) I turned with it (the hat) to the car when a shell exploded right on top of us.

Somehow the force of the explosion seemed to travel round the car, and blow me under the back wheel. The next thing I was hearing Mr. Holman call out "The General's hit" (and) I got up and we three lifted (him) into the car. I went back to get (his) cap (where) I saw blood and realised that (he) was not merely stunned as I had thought until that moment.

We rounded the car, travelled due west (and), as we pounded along a fearfully rough road we shouted to various (people) we passed and asked if they could tell of the existence of a neighbouring Field Dressing Station. Every single one of them stared at us open-mouthed.

We plugged on and came to a New Zealand Ambulance (where) the doctor, as soon as he looked at the General said "It's all up" and I guessed he had died in Mr. Holman's arms while I was holding his head steady. When he was taken into the dressing station he was quite dead.

We had time in which to look at ourselves, and to discover that a piece of the shell had cut a tyre of the car; another piece had cut the hood rather badly. It was a miracle that the remainder of us escaped.

We (then) made our way home and broke the news to various colleagues of the General (and) later I (went) with Mr. Holman to visit General Jobson, who commanded a brigade close by. Here we met Dr. Brissenden (and) learnt that Major-General Holmes had a habit of showing himself in a most injudicious manner.

Dr. B. said that (Holmes would) select a high open spot, spread out his map, and continue to inspect the map in company with his staff officers while ever there was a member able to stand and look on."

It is July 2, 1917, and Australia has lost its most senior military officer engaged in the war.

Frank Edwards' account continues on, the details of which are not relevant here save the one paragraph that stands out for an almost matter-of-fact acceptance of what must have been a truly horrendous experience:

"We went to General Holmes' funeral at Trois Arbres cemetery in the afternoon."

William Holmes is buried in foreign soil (Steenwerck, Belgium) just two months shy of his fifty-fifth birthday.

Three days later, on July 5, The Sydney Morning Herald breaks this devastating news under the headline "Major-General Holmes. Killed In Action."

Actually it's a very (very) close relative who is the first (at home) to know, the column beginning with "Captain Arthur Holmes, of Manly, received information last night that his brother had been killed" before continuing with a summary of the General's vast military achievements, referencing not only the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) but also the Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (CMG) and the Volunteer Decoration (VD).

Some personal information that may not have been widely known the Herald also brings to attention, specifically that William Holmes "was a widower and he had one son, Major Basil Holmes, serving with him in France, and one daughter who resides at Neutral Bay (who) is the wife of Colonel J. Travers who commands an infantry battalion in France."

His loss is felt not only deeply by family but across military ranks and the public alike, as The Sydney Morning Herald, on July 6, reports:

"From General Sir William Birdwood, commanding First Australian and New Zealand Army Corps: – we have lost a most capable officer whose undaunted bravery and cheerfulness in all circumstances were an example to all. Australia has lost a really brave servant."

"From General Sir Alexander Godley, commanding Second Australian and New Zealand Army Corps: – a great loss not only to Australia, but the Empire."

In the same article, but most certainly not an afterthought:

"In addition to four brothers mentioned yesterday, Major-General Holmes has left four sisters."

And then, a few days later on July 9:

"Mr. C. E. W. Bean, Commonwealth correspondent with the A.I.F., cables from France: – his (Holmes') practice of visiting the front line during battle when news was difficult to obtain was known to almost every Australian in France."

While he was taking Mr. Holman (the N.S.W. Premier) to view the battlefield from what was ordinarily a perfectly safe position, a shell fell near them. General Holmes was quoted as saying, laughing at the same time, "They must know you are coming."

Many of our Generals have made names for themselves for courage, but General Holmes won a name which could be coveted by any man in any army."

Four months later, on November 8 and under the heading "Mr. Holman's Trip", the Herald tells of an informal meeting held by the N.S.W. Premier, whereby he presented a "comprehensive report of his doings abroad as representative of the State Government" and where "I had the honour of being received in audience by his Majesty the King (who) was good enough to express the deepest concern regarding the death of General Holmes, and showed a wide knowledge of (Holmes') merits and career."



Clearly, if none greater a figure than the head of the British Empire knows of you, then William Holmes the soldier is a man not to be forgotten. Of course, while seemingly destined to be a 'military man' – his father was a Captain in the New South Wales Military Forces and the young William grew up in Victoria Barracks, Paddington – he had a civilian life too, as noted earlier.

Before the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage, William Holmes worked at the Sydney Mint prior to joining the Department of Works as a clerk when aged sixteen. His long term (from 1895) as the Water Board's Secretary and Chief Clerk oversees many significant projects including construction of the Cataract, Cordeaux and Avon dams, Reservoir No. 1 and 2 at Potts Hill, the establishment of storm water channels and low level sewage pumping stations to rid Sydney of outbreaks of typhoid which plague the city during the late nineteenth century. (1)

No surprise then that the Herald's March 7, 1918 edition reports that "At yesterday's meeting of the (Water Board) it was decided to erect a memorial tablet to the late Major General Holmes on the bandstand of Gladstone Park reservoir, Balmain." (2)

The impact of his premature passing certainly doesn't lessen with time – the Herald, August 30, 1919: "The Minister for Works unveiled a tablet to the memory of Major-General Holmes who was secretary to the board (the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage) until his death in France."

Almost *three years later* (April 1920) he is again remembered, and fondly, in a State Dinner held by the New South Wales Government in honour of General Birdwood who "spoke intimately of the part played (in the war) by other New South Wales forces, and paid a striking tribute to the late General Holmes (saying) he had never come across a more lovable character (who) was always cheery, was as brave as a lion, and was ready to face anything."

That this posthumous praise is interrupted, as the Herald reports, with repeated bouts of "applause," indicates that William Holmes' rightful legacy in the eyes of his peers (and others), both within military and civilian corridors alike, is more than obvious.

Given, however, that in the few years since his passing there are already a couple of memorials, would it not be unreasonable to suggest lending his name to a major piece of infrastructure... for example, a road perhaps?

*Footnotes:*

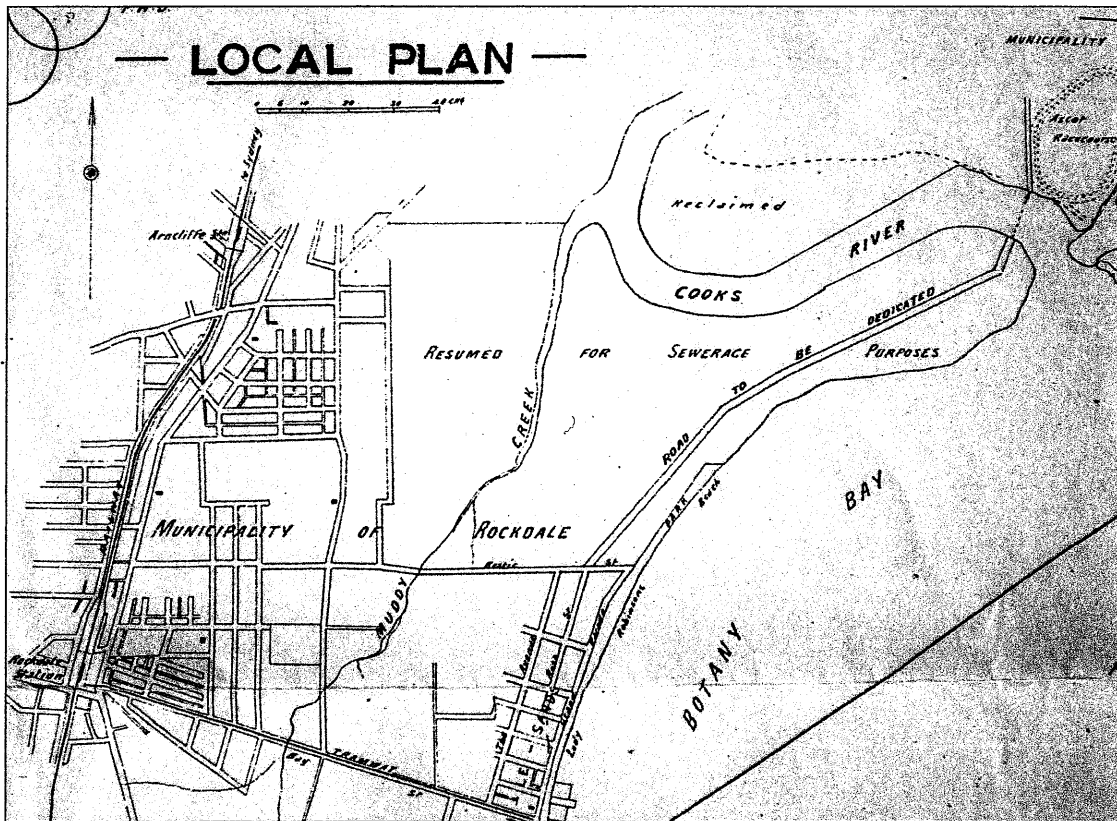
(1) The Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage was renamed to Sydney Water in 1999. A current employee, Peter Byrne, advises that the bronze bas-relief bust of William Holmes has recently been relocated to its Potts Hill Facility, 20 William Holmes Street, Potts Hill in Sydney, where it is (in Peter's words) "prominently displayed along with a number of Honour Boards".

(2) Mentioned earlier (page 2 – "a bandstand which was demolished following vandalism in the early 1950's" from which a plaque was relocated to its present-day location at the southern end of General Holmes Drive (according to family folklore).

### *From the Quay to Sans Souci*

Below is a section of the Municipality of Rockdale, a 'local plan' in early 1918: as can be seen, transport to Brighton-le-Sands from north of Cooks River is limited to a train to Rockdale Station and then by tram down Bay Street.

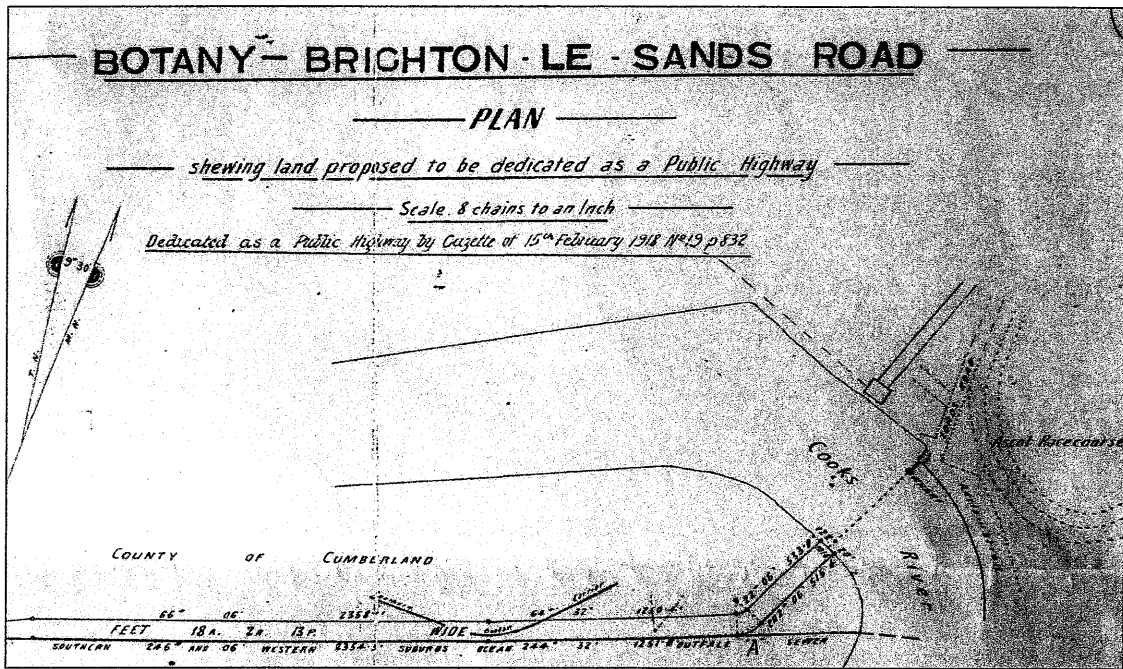
The river is not for (direct) crossing by vehicle – horse-drawn or motorised.



What might be of interest to anyone at the time considering honouring the memory of General William Holmes would be that there is a 'road to be dedicated' branching off Bestic Street in a north-easterly direction along and beyond Lady Robinson's Beach.

This diagram however is an insert from a considerably larger engineering schematic, another part of which appears on the following page.

What is of note in this overall plan (apart from the width of the new road to be one hundred feet) is the spelling of 'showing' (shewing), that it has been 'dedicated as a public highway by gazette', and that traffic would cross the river by punt (as indicated by a dotted line joining up with a wharf not far from Ascot Racecourse).



And, while it should be noted that the road in this 'local plan' is identified as 'Botany - Brighton Le Sands', a keyword in the description immediately underneath is 'proposed', leaving it open to alteration should a more appropriate name be offered.

A copy of the 'gazette' this plan references follows, for those so inclined:

Department of Public Works,  
Sydney, 14th February, 1918.

**SCHEDULE.**

Land dedicated as a public highway at Rockdale.

All that piece or parcel of land situate in the Municipality of Rockdale, parish of St. George, county of Cumberland, and State of New South Wales, being part of the land resumed for sewerage purposes: Commencing on the northern side of Bestie-street, 66 feet wide, at a point bearing 77 degrees 48 minutes and distant 3 chains 26.2 links from the intersection of the southern side of that street with the south-eastern side of The Avenue; and bounded thence on the north-west by lines successively bearing 41 degrees 34 minutes 2.1243 feet, 40 degrees 53 minutes 936.7 feet, 60 degrees 23 minutes 5639 feet, 66 degrees 6 minutes 2.3581 feet, 64 degrees 32 minutes 1.2504 feet, a curved line, being 58.1 feet of the arc of a circle, the centre of which lies towards the north-west, having a radius of 78.8 feet, and the chord bears 43 degrees 31 minutes for a distance of 57 feet, and a line bearing 22 degrees 6 minutes 533 feet; thence on the north-east by the right bank of Cook's River bearing 122 degrees 20 minutes 101.5 feet; thence on the south-east by a line bearing 202 degrees 6 minutes 515.4 feet, a curved line, being 132.4 feet of the arc of a circle, the centre of which lies towards the north-east, having a radius of 178.8 feet, and the chord bears 223 degrees 21 minutes for a distance of 129.4 feet, and lines successively bearing 244 degrees 32 minutes 1.2518 feet, 246 degrees 6 minutes 2.3545 feet, 240 degrees 28 minutes 844.7 feet, 220 degrees 53 minutes 920 feet, and 221 degrees 34 minutes 2.0349 feet; and thence on the south by the northern side of Bestie-street aforesaid, bearing 269 degrees 33 minutes 45 seconds 134.6 feet, to the point of commencement,—having an area of 18 acres 2 roods 13 perches, or thereabouts.

[R. and B. 1917-1,794]

[3751]

*New South Wales Government Gazette, No. 19, page 832*



By this date then – 14<sup>th</sup> February 1918 – the ‘land dedicated as a public highway at Rockdale’ is a done deal. Within a few months it appears that Rockdale Council has been informed of the same (the meeting minutes of the thirteenth of June reference correspondence from the Department of Local Government, a letter “dated 31<sup>st</sup> May re road from Botany to Rockdale along Lady Robinson’s Beach.”)

The Department of Public Works will wear the cost (their report for the ‘year ended June 1919’, under ‘roads’ on page 15, will state that “a commencement was made on the construction of a road from Botany to Rockdale along Lady Robinson’s Beach”; and for the ‘year ended June 1920’ it will be reported that “expenditure on (the) new road from Botany to Rockdale has been proceeding and amounted to £9,130. Work was not completed.”)

Of course, well before *any* of this, there would be much discussion and negotiation, all preceded by someone with an idea. In our day we cannot imagine life without General Holmes Drive and one could be forgiven for thinking that, in ‘their’ day, the proposal for such an integral road artery across Cooks River to Mascot, Botany and beyond would have come from *within* Rockdale... but one would be wrong.

Six years prior (to the plan “shewing land proposed to be dedicated as a Public Highway”), on August 15, 1912, The Sydney Morning Herald’s page 7 contains, as usual, any number of pieces, of varying interest no doubt.

Where the one titled “A Proposed Road” rates in the reading public’s attention span is unknown, however it is the first (identifiable) mention in the print media of what would eventually become General Holmes Drive.

**A PROPOSED ROAD.**

Alderman John Leitch, of the Water and Sewerage Board, is submitting a proposal to the whole of the councils interested for opening up a new and direct route between the city and the Illawarra suburbs. This new route, it is claimed, will relieve the traffic along King-street, Newtown, and Cook's River-road, and at the same time obviate the necessity for widening that thoroughfare.

The scheme is to connect Botany-road, Botany, with the drive along Lady Robinson's Beach. Lord's-road, leading from Botany-road, runs down to the water's edge at Cook's River. On the opposite side of the river there is a road running part of the way along the beach. This road has been built by the Water and Sewerage Board. Then there is a gap of two miles without any road, but beyond that there is a road from Brighton to Doll's Point on to Sandringham and Sans Souci. All that would be required to link up the roads would be the construction of a bridge and two miles of roadway at an approximate expenditure of £10,000. If this proposal was carried out there would be an almost straight road from Circular Quay to Sans Souci. It would also form a new outlet from Sydney to the Illawarra suburbs, and would relieve South Sydney of its disabilities in not having ready access with its southern neighbours, and would at the same time help to relieve the present congestion in the traffic of the metropolis.

Selected extracts – the parts of interest to Rockdale residents – follow:

“Alderman John Leitch, of the Water and Sewerage Board, is submitting a proposal for opening up a new and direct route between the city and the Illawarra suburbs. The scheme is to connect Botany-road, Botany, with the drive along Lady Robinson’s Beach.”

“Lord’s-road, leading from Botany-road,” (and adjacent to Ascot Racecourse, in use from 1904 to 1941) “runs down to the water’s edge at Cooks River. On the opposite side there is a road, built by the Water and Sewerage Board, running part of the way along the beach. Then there is a gap of two miles, but beyond that there is a road from Brighton to Doll’s Point on to Sandringham and Sans Souci. All that would be required is the construction of a bridge and two miles of roadway at an approximate expenditure of £10,000.

If this was carried out there would be an almost straight road from Circular Quay to Sans Souci, and would help relieve the present congestion in the traffic.”

Hard to imagine perhaps, but even ‘back then’ traffic congestion is an issue, with only ‘two miles of roadway’ said to be ‘all that would be required’ along with ‘the construction of a bridge’ (deemed a necessity even at this earliest of early stages.)

Unfortunately (for the locals) it, (the bridge), when it does eventuate, is somewhat of a latecomer: while to us the concept seems a ‘no-brainer’ we may well ask ‘why’.

Then again, (casting back to an earlier statement, “this ‘man of mystery’”), a question *more* likely to be raised is ‘who is this ‘John Leitch’ character?’

From 1901 (at the least) whenever the name ‘John Leitch’ appears in the print media he is referenced more often than not as ‘of Redfern’, and a group known as the ‘Town Planning Association’ (of which he was a member) lists his address as “108 Bourke Street” in the same suburb in 1916 and again 1922, whereas the City of Sydney Archives has him residing at this same address as early as 1905.

What then, if any, connection is there between the name ‘John Leitch’ and the Rockdale Municipality?

Given the word ‘connection’, a short reply might well be in the negative... *unless* consideration is expanded to include ‘influence’.

If nothing else, in support there is the article from August 1912, “A Proposed Road”, attributing to him the idea of what would become the thoroughfare bearing General Holmes’ name. At the very least this demonstrates not only an interest in solutions to the growing transport issues of the time, but suggests a thinking beyond his home turf (Redfern), south over Cooks River to the Rockdale Municipality suburbs.

All very well. But this alone doesn’t necessarily make him a ‘Rockdale man’, per se.

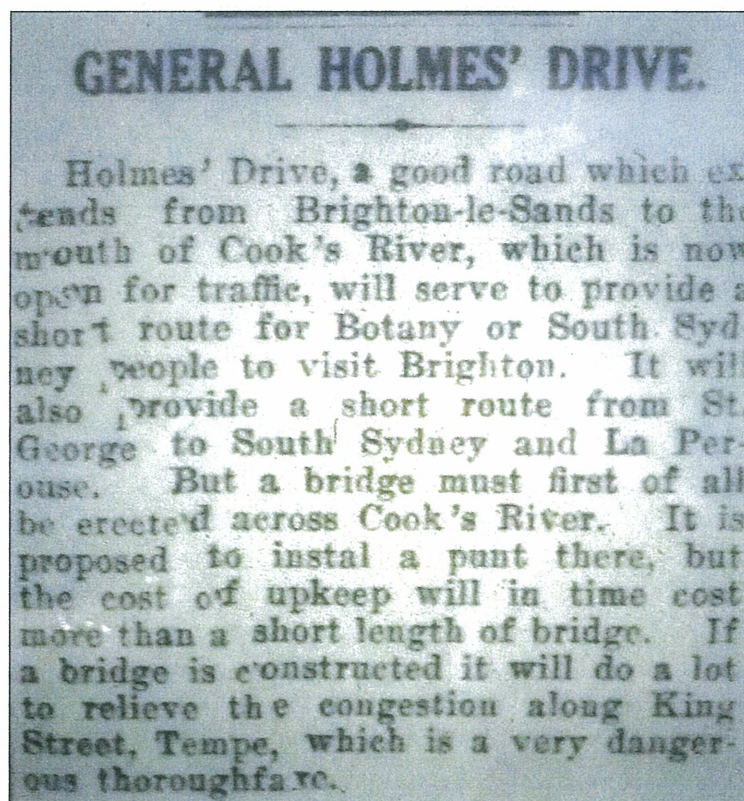
≈

These days, the dependency placed on transport infrastructure almost guarantees that news of any proposal is forefront via multiple forms of the media. It is difficult to understand a time when this was not so but then some mysteries of the past *do* need to be accepted 'as is'.

Given the significance of William Holmes (both before and after his untimely demise in war) it's reasonable to assume that the mainstream press of the time would report on a major reclamation of land (the redundant North Brighton Sewage Farm), the purpose of which is the road of John Leitch's 1912 proposal that ultimately bears the Major-General's name – however this does not occur until some years after it *first* appears (in a recognisable form) in the May 1919 Rockdale Council minutes (and even then it is referenced as *General Holmes Avenue*).

Apparently, the road's construction and (eventual) availability to the public was not viewed 'back then' as the 'big deal' it might be these days.

Even the local district papers, *'The St. George Call'* and *'The Hurstville Propeller'* appear to contain no mention until "Holmes' Drive" (below) is finally open for traffic.



*From The Hurstville Propeller after the road opens – July 6, 1923*



Of more surprise (to us ‘these days’), it is 1927 – *four years* later – before ‘*Wilson’s Street Directory*’ (the street-finder of choice) lists it: by now as *Drive* and not *Avenue*, and ‘off Grand-pde, Map 2, Sq. J’, as per the index.



Considering these ‘past mysteries’ then, it is little wonder that it is difficult to locate much (of relative significance) to elevate the name ‘John Leitch’ to where he can be mentioned (in terms of distinction) in the same sentence as (Major-General) William Holmes.

Not so back in ‘their time’ though. The public a hundred-odd years ago had no such problem thinking of both in the same instance, particularly while, for some years, both were employed at the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage. (1)

Collaboration between the two is an imperative from the outset, for more than a few difficult financial circumstances face them (and the Water Board), resulting in various duet appearances in the newspapers.

For example, under a heading “Starved Services. Work Hung Up. Serious Effect on Water and Sewerage”, the reader wouldn’t have to think too hard as to the subject matter:

“The secretary (of the Water Board) Colonel Holmes presented a statement (that) showed that the amount required for necessary improvements, and the amount set aside by the (Government), left a deficiency of £97,104. Alderman Leitch pointed out that the board was only working from hand to mouth at any time and was not giving the people what they required, being twelve months behind in their work.”

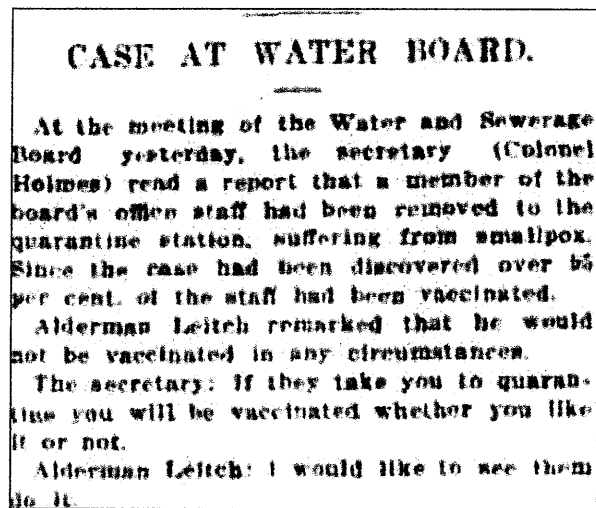
*Footnote:* (1) William Holmes was employed with the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage from 1888 until his death in 1917; John Leitch was employed from 1912 until (at least) 1922.



Under another somewhat alarming column titled “No Money. A Poverty-Stricken Board. Sewerage Held Up”, the implication is obvious with regard to some negotiations with the British-Australian Tobacco Company:

“The secretary (of the Water Board) Colonel Holmes explained that the (tobacco company) would shortly begin operations with 1400 hands, and it was absolutely urgent that both water and sewerage services be provided at once. Alderman Leitch stated that the whole of the municipal councils were arranging a deputation to urge the (Government) to provide more money. He did not think the Minister knew that they were six months behind with their work, in addition to having no money available for new works.”

Naturally, as in most work relationships, the two don’t always agree. The term we might use in describing such demonstrations of different opinions would be ‘robust’.



*From The Sydney Morning Herald, 8 August, 1913*

This article, titled “Case At Water Board”, is under a column heading “Vaccination. Smallpox Cases”.

Colonel (at that time) Holmes is advising Alderman (John) Leitch that “if they take you to quarantine you will be vaccinated whether you like it or not”, to which Leitch replies “I would like to see them do it.”

It appears that, despite concerning reports about trouble in the Balkans which, it is hoped, does not cross European borders, the reading public has a touch of the voyeur about them. A modern day comparison might be when politicians ‘spit the dummy’ during the course of running the country – we, the public, have an insatiable need to know, no matter how minor (and perhaps comparatively insignificant) the ‘incident’.

### *A man called Leitch*

We know of 'people of note' by virtue of folklore, recorded history and, in more recent times, the media in all its varying forms. On some occasions such people (and the associated deeds that provided them such notoriety) are recalled decades, centuries, even millennia later – then again many simply drop off the radar, which instigates the tantalising prospect of a resurrection, of sorts.

≈

On the very same day The Sydney Morning Herald is educating its readers regarding a verse attributed to the Roman poet Horace, there's a report of a draft blueprint whereby the City of Sydney Council would swallow six of its neighbours.

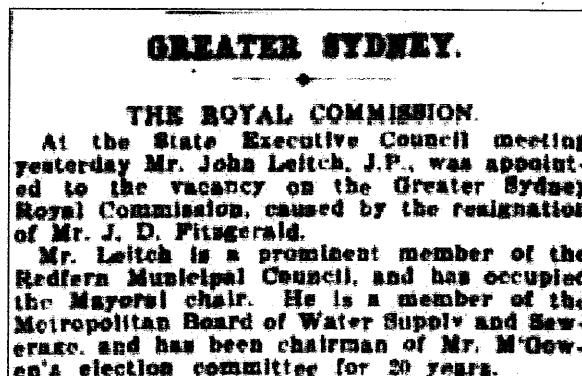
The reasoning behind such a 'merger' is one of those instances of history somewhat repeating itself because, back in 1913, on April 21, the Herald records the N.S.W. State Cabinet appointing a Royal Commission to "inquire and report as to the best basis for a greater Sydney scheme." This public inquiry, as it morphed into what would be referenced generally as '*Greater Sydney*', would be quite familiar to us in its scope.

A month later, under a title "Mr J. D. Fitzgerald's Views", the Herald reports of the initial meeting of this Royal Commission – and Mr J. D. Fitzgerald, a "barrister-at-law, chairman of the Housing Board", and first witness called, doesn't mince words (paraphrased here for brevity):

"The re-modelling of the whole of the street system of Greater Sydney was imperatively necessary, and could not be done effectively and beneficially by 42 authorities working in 42 hermetically sealed administrative areas."

The news article itself is lengthy, (much further on and one of the '42', Rockdale Council itself, gets a mention as "an area to be included in Greater Sydney"), with the argument in favour of such an amalgamation centred on "traffic congestion caused by an out-of-date street plan", problems easily recognisable these days.

Three weeks after its inception the same Mr. Fitzgerald resigns on health grounds, opening the door for a certain John Leitch to fill this vacancy on the Greater Sydney Royal Commission.



In describing this “member of the Redfern Municipal Council”, the *keyword* is ‘prominent’. It’s a condensed summary – probably because, a year prior, the Herald ran a far more verbose disclosure.

It’s March 27, 1912, and under the headline “Water Board. Labour Man Selected” there’s more than a hint of political machinations at work with the initial Government nominee rolled in favour of “Mr. John Leitch, one of the founders of the Redfern Labour League (also Secretary and Treasurer of the same in 1901)”. He is also “an alderman and ex-Mayor of Redfern (1908-1910), a builder by profession (who) on various occasions both at the council table and through the medium of the press, (has) criticised the actions of the board.”

(Fate has seemingly played its hand in placing John Leitch (Vice-President of the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage <sup>(1)</sup>) with a certain William Holmes, Secretary and Chief Clerk of the same employer, and himself recently promoted in his other capacity – to Colonel (as head of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade). Of course neither man can possibly be aware of what is to eventuate that will link them: one will, in a few months’ time this same year, propose a piece of infrastructure that will, some years onwards, be provided the name of the other in a posthumous gesture befitting his legacy.)

The article regarding the Water Board’s new Vice-President continues with its revelation of “The Appointee”:

“Politically Mr. Leitch is a great supporter of the Labour movement (and) no man is more popular in Redfern today among the poor. He takes a deep interest in sport (and is) a prominent member of the Redfern Bowling Club.”

‘Mr. Leitch’ has been ‘prominent’ politically from as far back as 1901...

6 February 1902: The Sydney Morning Herald reports of John Leitch “opposing the (sitting) Mayor for the Belmore Ward, addressing a meeting” at the conclusion of which he is “accorded a vote of confidence.”

17 October 1905: “polling took place in the Surry Hills Ward for the election of an alderman, the result of the ballot (being) Cridland, 279; Leitch 214. Majority for Cridland.”

6 November 1905: the Herald tells of the South Sydney Federal Labour League’s “annual garden and sports party, controlled by a committee of which Mr. John Leitch was president.”

*Footnote:* (1) John Leitch’s initial appointment as Vice-President is in force until 1916, after which the newspapers report him as continually re-elected on twelve month terms, the last noted in this research being 1922.

Undaunted by his narrow loss (to Cridland in October 1905) Leitch, three years later, is finally successful, the February 10, 1908, Herald reporting him "elected Mayor of Redfern" and to be "a prominent member of the Labour Party (having been) identified with the movement, as far as Redfern is concerned, since its establishment in 1891. The Mayoress, Mrs. Leitch, is just as active a worker in the Labour movement as her husband"

John Leitch, who is destined to be re-elected Redfern Mayor in March 1910 and again during 1914, clearly is "keenly alive to (his) public sense of duty" as the third line in this letter to the Herald editor below states (along with a description of our Chinese friends that perhaps says more about the writer and what was considered acceptable comment at the time.)

**CONGESTED AREAS.**  
**TO THE EDITOR OF THE HERALD.**  
Sir,—I am pleased that the Lord Mayor of Sydney and Alderman John Leitch, of Redfern, are keenly alive to their public sense of duty, as demonstrated by their visit to the congested areas just outside the city boundary, viz., in Redfern. I have all along contended that the slum areas of Sydney are not destroyed or abolished; they are simply "passed on" to the adjoining municipalities, and unfortunately we get more than our fair share, particularly the Chinese underclass and their concomitant evils, which tend to pollute, contaminate, and degrade any area where they may settle.  
From past experience one forms the conclusion that resumption of congested areas is not the right policy. It rather gives a premium to the owners to allow their property to fall into disrepair and ruin, and then get full value. From a sanitary and health point it would be far the better policy to condemn all properties that are a menace to public health. Should the Lord Mayor of Sydney and Alderman Leitch wish to continue their personal investigations I would be pleased to conduct them over some congested areas in this district, with a view of having them demolished.  
I am, etc..  
**THOS. ROSE.**

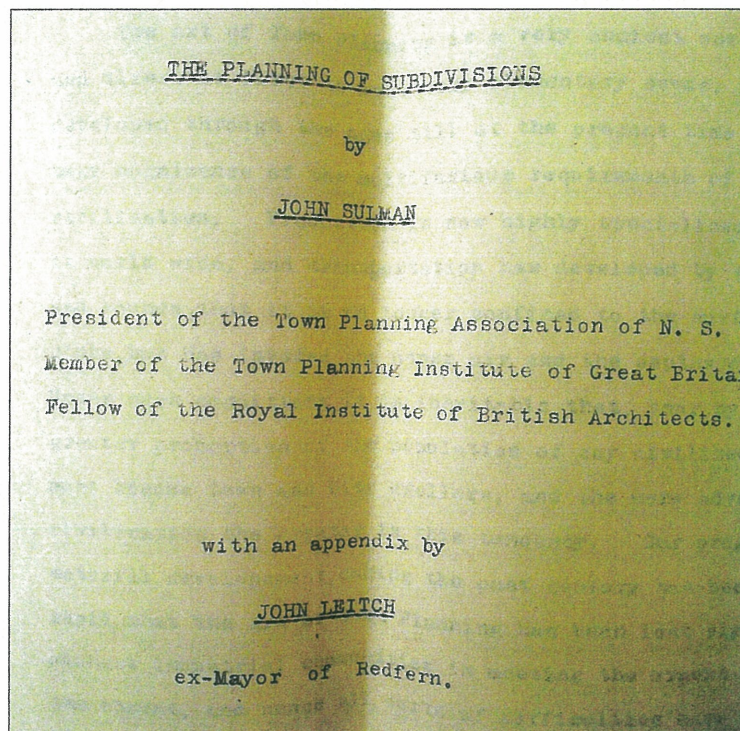
Moving on then... and to a June 18, 1914, article titled "Local Government. Municipalism At Work" with the sub-heading "The Avenue To Lady Robinson's Beach", a direct reference to what will become General Holmes Drive.

"Nothing but praise can be given to Alderman Leitch for his splendid scheme which has a two-fold purpose. If it is accomplished it will set a splendid example to deal with Greater Sydney purposes later on and, in addition, will form a commercial asset to the communication of Sydney. There is no doubt that the future traffic on the roads will be by motors (1). The energy of Alderman Leitch in anything he attacks can be relied upon to keep the scheme before the authorities concerned."

*Footnote:* (1) The first automobile registered in Rockdale was a mere nine years prior to this sentiment, 1905.

*The 'energy of Alderman Leitch' and others*

John Leitch, once-(and destined to again be)-Mayor of Redfern, by 1913 is a high-ranking Water Board employee (Vice-President no less), is on the committee of the 'Greater Sydney' Royal Commission, and is destined to soon hold various postings within the Town Planning Association of New South Wales, a peak lobbying body in the area of urban development.



Above is the front page of many, an apparently end-of-year presentation to the Town Planning Association membership (lodged in a folder marked 'December, 1916'), with "an appendix by John Leitch", which unfortunately didn't survive to become a Mitchell Library manuscript.

The following extract finds the President, John Sulman, reminiscing on some matters from a few years prior:

"In 1908 the writer urged that Botany Road should be widened as it forms one of the main arteries of the City. Alderman Leitch took the matter up and, by persistent advocacy and agitation, obtained a promise from the Government; together with an extension across Cooks River, along the sea face of the Sewage Farm, as soon as the latter became available."

This presents a slight problem – the first *known* mention in the news media of a certain 'proposal' associates it with John Leitch, in 1912: here however, in this document, 'the writer' (John Sulman) states that he, four years prior, urged for Botany Road to be widened, and then references 'an extension across Cooks River' which is probably what will become General Holmes Drive.



It's perhaps no more than a quirk of grammar (the use of the semi-colon between 'Government' and 'together') but it's not entirely clear whose idea this is – did John Sulman 'urge' for it in 1908, or did John Leitch 'agitate' for it when he 'took the matter (widening Botany Road) up'?

Does this *really* deserve interrogation though? The road (approximately two miles amongst the many hundreds more in the Rockdale Local Government Area) has serviced the community needs for almost a century, and quite likely *someone* would have eventually 'proposed' it, wouldn't they?

Then again, by its very association, the 'Drive' named for a person killed in the First World War perpetuates that person – those who come after cannot forget that person's name (at the very least). By posing the query "generations have wondered who General Holmes was", one of Ron Rathbone's books challenges readers to inform themselves which, by its nature, maintains William Holmes' (and that war's) relevance.

Clearly, remembering or commemorating whoever conjured up a road straddling the Rockdale (for the most part) and Botany Municipalities does not compare (with either the man or the event): however, that should not necessarily mean that the effort associated with this road's conception should be lost to history altogether.

Therefore, is it John Sulman or John Leitch who should be provided the occasional thought?

≈

Before the 'Greater Sydney' Royal Commission of 1913 there was another, four years earlier, intended to collate ideas for the "improvement of the City of Sydney and its Suburbs". Despite its recommendations being largely left in the realms of desire, the name 'John Sulman' appears as a witness to the hearings on eleven occasions, more than any other; he would also, in 1921, be appointed chairman of the 'Federal Capital Advisory Committee' <sup>(1)</sup> and be credited later on as influential in the (eventual) construction of Canberra.

While it is not relevant here to present a detailed biography of Sulman himself, it is suffice to suggest that he was a person of significant standing in the area of urban planning and development... and the Arts. His name might seem familiar – perhaps the 'Sir John Sulman Prize', held concurrently with the Archibald at the Art Gallery of N.S.W, rings a bell?

In addition, John Sulman was also a founding member of the Town Planning Association of New South Wales in October 1913, an advocacy body that counted amongst its committee no less figures (amongst others) than Walter Burley Griffin (the National Capital), John D. Fitzgerald (the first witness called to the 1913 Greater Sydney Royal Commission, and after whom is named Fitzgerald Avenue, Maroubra), and (by 1916) J. J. C. Bradfield (the Sydney Harbour Bridge).

*Footnote:* (1) The Town Planning Association documents in the Mitchell Library note that, on February 9, 1921, John Leitch moved a "vote of congratulation" regarding Sulman's appointment.

The description 'notable and influential' hardly does justice to such luminaries, and it's reasonable to suggest that, given the company he kept, John Sulman would not allow another to 'steal his thunder', so to speak.

Yet, as mentioned on more than one occasion, the print media gave John Leitch top billing in the 1912 August article about 'a proposed road'; it's 'his road' in a manner of speaking again in the June 1914 article "A Great Avenue: Quay to Lady Robinson's Beach", which details a Redfern Town Hall meeting from which it was reported that "some time ago the Mayor of Redfern (Leitch) drew up a plan" (for what would ultimately be General Holmes Drive), with "the matter left in the hands of Alderman Leitch and Mr. W. R. Bagnall (member of Legislative Assembly for St. George) for submission to the Minister for Works."

Notwithstanding then future revelations to the contrary, it is therefore reasonable and correct to state (almost a century later) that it *was* John Leitch who gave birth to the concept that would forge a link between Mascot/Botany and (in the immediate sense) Brighton-le-Sands – certainly by the middle of 1914 the public was in no doubt.

All 'they' (that public) needed was for this 'concept' to materialise.

≈

A major thrust of the '*Greater Sydney*' agenda was an easing of the city and suburbs' traffic congestion issues. Come August 1914 however and the subject goes somewhat quiet in the newspapers as the situation escalates in Europe to what would be termed the '*Western Front*', the only related article of note (albeit unconnected with Sydney's problems) being that in late 1915 with John Sulman "president of the Town Planning Association" signalling his approval of and support for "Mr. Walter B. Griffin (design) of the Federal Capital".

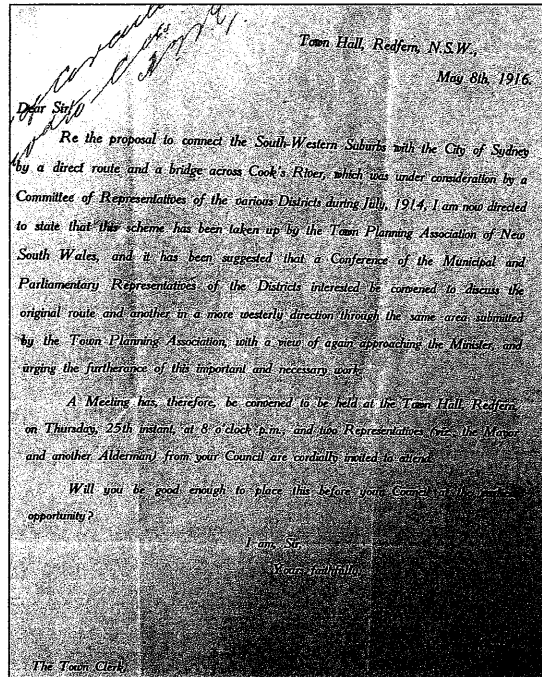
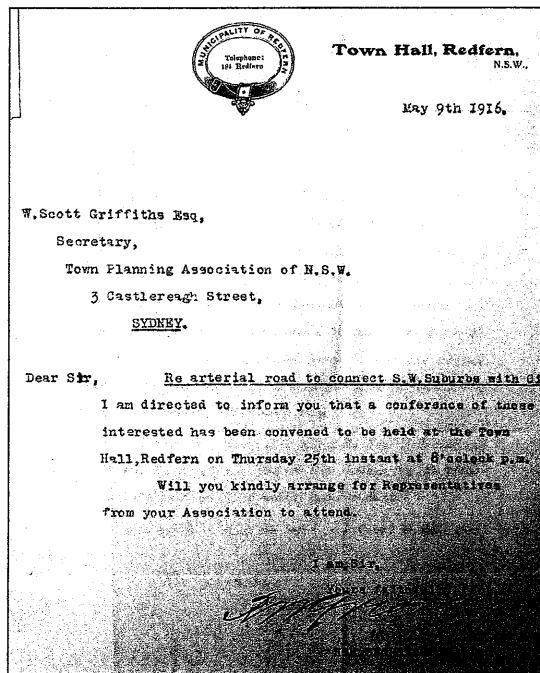
Notwithstanding the grave events overseas, the identified need for a main 'local' road relieving the 'isolation' (as some described it) of the suburbs south of Cooks River was, nonetheless, always likely to become a reality. As mentioned already, far more influential forces external to Rockdale Council – the '*Greater Sydney*' Royal Commission and the Town Planning Association of N.S.W. – aligned to generate the initial impetus, and at some point the residents who would be affected obviously would need representation by their elected members.

Come early 1916, and one of these 'outsiders' makes its presence via the mail.

At a meeting of the Rockdale Council on March 23 it is noted that correspondence had been received from the Town Planning Association, requesting "consideration for a scheme for an arterial road to connect the south-western suburbs with the city (seeking) the Council's cooperation in a deputation to the Government."

A few months later, on the eighteenth of May, the Council receives two letters from the Municipality of Redfern. While those actual letters have not survived, the subject matter would have been similar to those sent a week or so prior to representatives of the Town Planning Association – copies of these follow.

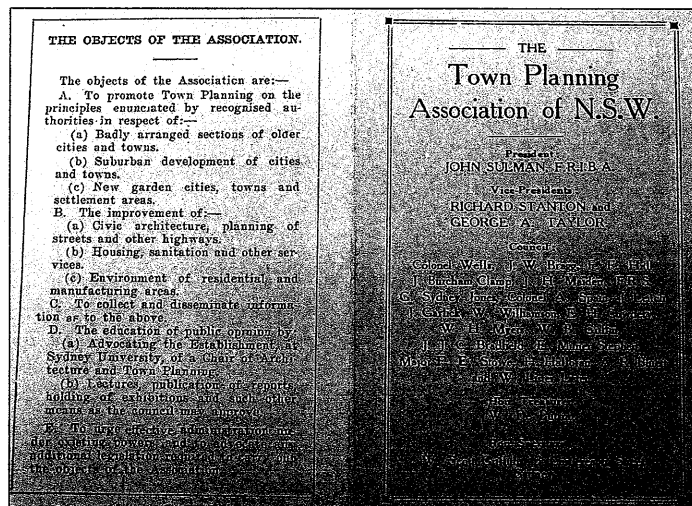
## General Holmes And A Man Called Leitch



Mr. Grierson (whose signature appears under 'yours faithfully' in the left-hand letter), is informing of a conference "of those interested" regarding the "arterial road to connect S. W. Suburbs with City" to be held at the Redfern Town Hall on May 25.

The right-hand letter (copies of which would have been distributed to 'those interested' but probably not the Town Planning Association for obvious reasons) advises to 'those interested' that the scheme has been taken up by the T.P.A. itself.

Mr. Grierson may also have forwarded (to 'those interested') the T.P.A.'s version of a business card...



Considering that this contains some impressive names such as Sulman, Bradfield and (by this date) John Leitch as well, it would clearly be an invitation not to be rejected so, duly, on the motion of Rockdale Council Aldermen Beehag and O'Connell, the Mayor (W. W. Monahan) and Alderman W. Taylor are appointed to attend.

The wheels and cogs of progress have been firmly set in motion. A deputation representing ten municipalities is to meet on May 25, 1916, to discuss "the two schemes" (the Town Planning Association's Secretary, Mr. W. Scott-Griffiths, had earlier created an alternate route to the west of, and running parallel with, John Leitch's).

With public interest now re-energised in the project, The Sydney Morning Herald runs two articles about a fortnight prior to this meeting.

The first, under a heading "Town Planning", merely states the obvious.

At the monthly meeting of the council of the Town Planning Association on Wednesday it was reported that the conference to consider the proposed arterial road to connect the south-western suburbs with the city has been convened for the Town Hall, Redfern, on the 25th inst. The president and honorary secretary have been appointed to represent the association at the conference.

The other, (paraphrased here for brevity), while simply reminding one and all that "for some time there has been a proposal to connect the south-western suburbs with the city of Sydney by a direct route and bridge across Cooks River", nonetheless, being within a periodical column titled "Real Estate: Notes of the week", seems intent on setting the public's mind alight with the potential land sales that would result.

From the May 25 conference 'those interested' agree to call on the State Government Minister for Local Affairs – come June 14 and, along with representatives of Rockdale Council, those of Redfern, Mascot, Waterloo, Alexandria, Botany, Kogarah, Hurstville, St. Peters, and Sutherland "waited upon Mr. Fitzgerald" as The Sydney Morning Herald would report the day after.

A copy of this article's first paragraph appears below but the details of note contained further on are – again it's "Alderman Leitch's scheme" (the time surely has come and gone for any rival claim); and there's the alternate scheme "on behalf of the Town-planning Association", with both "supplementary, not rival, and urgently wanted."

## TRAFFIC PROBLEMS

### SOUTH-WEST SUBURBS.

#### "TWO PRACTICAL SCHEMES."

The inadequacy of the roads between the city of Sydney and the south-western suburbs was emphasised by a large deputation which yesterday waited upon Mr. Fitzgerald, who is the Minister temporarily in charge of local government affairs. The deputation represented the municipalities of Redfern, Waterloo, Alexandria, Botany, Hurstville, Mascot, Rockdale, St. Peters, Kogarah, and the shire of Sutherland, and it was introduced by Mr. McGowan (Redfern).



The article also states, with regard to those real estate predictions, that "Alderman Leitch's road would give access to large areas of Crown land."

Somewhat understandably though, John Leitch's proposal, which from the outset had identified the necessity of a bridge, has by mid-1916 been toned down by the pragmatism wrought by events he could not have foreseen at the time: "the various speakers said that it was not sought to embarrass the Government by a demand for money in war-time. What was asked at present (was) an Act so that, when the work was undertaken after the war, the Government would not have to pay for improvements made by private persons in the meantime. It was suggested that the congestion might be immediately relieved and that a punt be used to convey traffic across the Cooks River."

≈

That same day as the Herald's report – June 15 – Rockdale Council meets, with Alderman Taylor reporting on the conference, the minutes stating that "Mr. J. D. Fitzgerald, Minister in charge of Local Government, showed that he was heart and soul in favour of Mr. Leitch's proposal – the road from Brighton-le-Sands to Cooks River giving access to Botany by a punt, and said he hoped the work would be started before he vacated (the) chair at the Local Government Department."

However, and despite Mr. Fitzgerald's fervent 'hope' of the work starting 'soon', construction would be some time in the making, as selected extracts from Rockdale Council meeting minutes over the ensuing *years* detail...

(From) 13th July, 1916:

"Alderman James Crawford said he had been informed on good authority that £12000 would be placed on the estimates for the construction of a roadway from Cooks River to Brighton-le-Sands along the foreshores of Botany Bay."

(From) 3rd May, 1917:

"(correspondence from) Department of Local Government forwarding copy of Proclamation in Government Gazette of the 13th April from which it will be seen that the construction of the road from Botany to Brighton along Lady Robinson's Beach, Ross Street, Henson Street, and the Parade, has been declared a National Work."

(From) 18th October, 1917:

"On the motion of Alderman W. W. Monahan the Clerk was directed to write to the Officer-in-charge of Local Government about the delay in the constructing of the new road from Cooks River to Brighton-Le-Sands."

(It is now over twelve months since the Council's June 15 meeting where 'work would be started'... and the operative word here is 'delay'.)

## General Holmes And A Man Called Leitch

(From) 13th June, 1918:

“Letter from Department of Local Government dated 31st May, 1918 re road from Botany to Rockdale along Lady Robinson’s Beach referred to the General Purposes Committee.”

(Unfortunately the actual ‘correspondence’ these minutes refer to did not survive so, while obviously unclear as to the content, this *could* be referencing the receipt of official notification. It is, after all, just over three months from the February 15, 1918, N.S.W. Government Gazette which declares the road a public highway.)

(From) 15th May, 1919:

“Alderman W. Taylor advocated the calling of a public meeting with a view of planting of trees to form an Avenue of Honor in memory of the Soldiers who took part in the war. The Mayor stated that he thought the matter had better stand over until the Peace Celebrations had taken place. It having been pointed out that the new roadway 100 ft. wide from Cooks River to Brighton-le-Sands was to be called Holmes Avenue in memory of the late Colonel Holmes, formerly Secretary of the Water & Sewerage Board, Alderman Monahan pointed out that Holmes Avenue would be a good place to plant the trees to form the Avenue of Honor.”

This is the *first* mention in Rockdale Council minutes of the road that (almost) has the name with which subsequent generations would identify it, and it coincides with the Department of Public Works’ report for the year ended June 1919 which references “a commencement made on the construction of a road from Botany to Rockdale along Lady Robinson’s Beach”.

(By September 4, Rockdale Council minutes will begin referencing it as *we* know it – ‘General Holmes Drive’)

So, around May 1919 (and probably not much before), ‘someone’ proposed the road be named for a highly distinguished casualty of the war – according to a descendant, some of the land resumed for the road had been part of the old Botany Sewage Farm which was under the control of the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage, and Holmes had lived in a pumping station near the route of road, hence the suggestion to name it after him.

While this information is from an unpublished book (and therefore difficult to verify), the proposition is substantiated in Ron Rathbone’s *Brighton-le-Sands: The suburb that grew from the sand hills*, wherein he states that “the Water Board insisted the new road be called General Holmes Drive.”

What *would* be beneficial however, would be a document, a newspaper entry – *anything* – detailing such a decision for (as Ron Rathbone’s book also states) the road was “originally to have been called Haig Avenue.”

*That* would be Field-Marshal Douglas Haig, British commander-in-chief of the Empire’s military forces in France from 1915 to 1918.

## General Holmes And A Man Called Leitch

That an *Australian* soldier (albeit a high-ranking Major-General and the most senior officer killed in the war) held sway in a time of 'Empire' speaks volumes not only about William Holmes but the man (or men) who led the argument. (1)

Unfortunately, nothing to the effect of who proposed this has come to light – all efforts with Rockdale Library, City of Sydney Archives, and Sydney Water (the current title of the Water Board) historians, have been to no avail.

*Footnote:* (1) Given that John Leitch was Vice-President (of the Water Board) from 1912 to (at the least) 1922, clearly the temptation is to suggest that he may have been instrumental in the name 'General Holmes Drive'. For two years prior to the war, he and Holmes (Secretary and Chief Clerk) were often in the news regarding the Water Board's activities; and while Holmes was in the war, Leitch retained the vice-presidency, and was in the role at the time of Holmes' death. Given the public outpouring of sympathy, it's reasonable to think that Leitch (who had a more intimate association by virtue of being a workplace colleague) would have been similarly affected.

***Build a road, and they will come***

At some time during 1916, probably December, the Town Planning Association of New South Wales holds a function. On the T.P.A. agenda is the document titled *'The Planning of Subdivisions'* authored by the President, John Sulman, with an appendix by John Leitch.

It has been a terrible year for the nation – the war overseas has continued on, despite early predictions that it would be over by the Christmas of the year it began; a short while after the end of April in the year following, the newspapers at home began mentioning somewhere most had never heard of – Gallipoli. By the Christmas of that same year – the one after the Christmas the war was supposed to have ended – thousands of Australians were lying dead in Turkish soil. The following year, 1916 would bring new foreign names to the public – Amiens, Bapaume, Pozieres, Flers – and the tally of wounded and dead would keep mounting.

In time one phrase would embody this senseless loss of husbands, brothers and sons as 'the Somme': it (and the Western Front overall) is somewhere that would no doubt leave an indelible memory on someone such as the Water Board Secretary, Major-General William Holmes, now very much otherwise occupied in charge of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Australian Imperial Force.

The mood at this T.P.A. meeting would therefore likely be sombre, underpinned by this slaughter taking place in France and Belgium – their association may well have members who heeded 'the call'. Nonetheless it would be necessary to maintain a sense of optimism for the future, for the day when the war would be over and the anticipated return of Australians such as General Holmes. Earlier this year, in June, John Leitch's 'proposed road', along with another from within the T.P.A., had been submitted for Government consideration. Now, at this meeting of the T.P.A., John Sulman's document references these plans in a low-key but nevertheless speculative manner:

"Assuming that both roads will be carried out, the whole area under review will be supplied with access by water, rail, and road of the most satisfactory character."

Given the grim circumstances elsewhere, Sulman is naturally cautionary:

"Development and improvement could be deferred till financial conditions are easier."

Further on (the document has been typed) someone has written in capitals "Modern Garden Suburb", with the possible intention of this being an afterthought heading. It can be imagined this is by the hand of either the two 'johns', Sulman or Leitch, one of whom might be getting to his feet to address his fellow T.P.A. members:

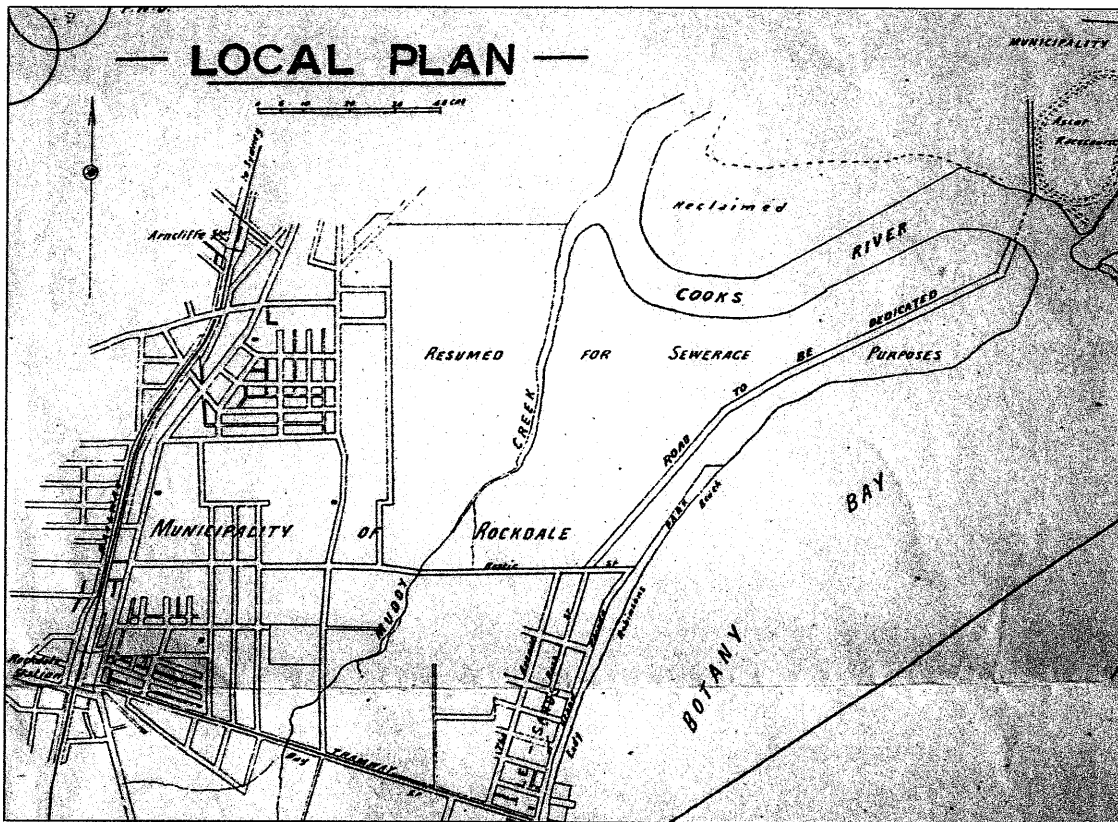
"Many of the suggestions (in this document) have been embodied in the plan for a suburb of superior character on the sand hills facing Botany Bay and Bestic Road, in the south-eastern corner of the Sewage Farm area. The sand hills would be levelled, and the spoil used to fill up adjoining depressions or low lying areas.



## General Holmes And A Man Called Leitch

From the Botany tram a branch line should be carried across the river to connect with the line at Brighton-le-Sands. The nearest railway station is Banksia. As Bestic Street gives the most direct access a tram should be laid thereon (and) should be widened to 80 ft."

This area being referenced is probably contained in this diagram, a snapshot from (what will be, in February 1918) the '*Botany – Brighton-le-Sands Road Plan; land dedicated as a Public Highway by Gazette.*'

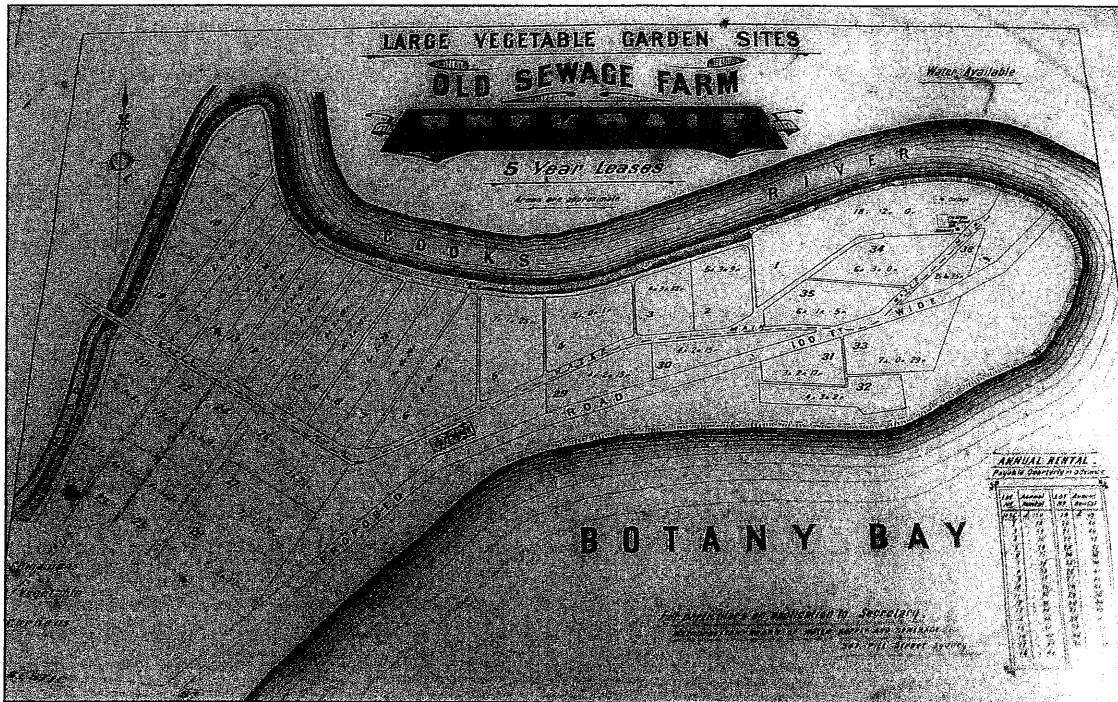


Either of the two ‘johns’ continues with explanation of how this suburb should be laid out by comparison with “a similar scheme in successful operation at Letchworth in England”. It’s easy to imagine either Sulman or Leitch being highly enthusiastic with regard to the prospects (as the following phrase suggests):

**“As a matter of fact the area would be absolutely salubrious.”**

22

The war in Europe would drag mercilessly on for two years, consuming countless numbers of men, women, children on both 'sides' of the conflict, including the unfortunate and well-lamented William Holmes: whomever replaces him at the Water Board inherits not only a rather difficult act to follow, but an air of authority when it comes to the inevitable opening up of land in association with the new road as the advertisement (from probably 1919) on the next page demonstrates, with 'full particulars on application to Secretary (of the Water Board)' etc etc, visible just below 'Botany Bay'.



A concise summary of the development that took place in the decade after the First World War is available in Ron Rathbone's book *'Brighton-le-Sands: The suburb that grew from the sand hills'*: in addition, an overview of meeting minutes demonstrates adequately Rockdale Council's (and by association ratepayers') rapid involvement with building and local infrastructure matters where the new road was concerned.

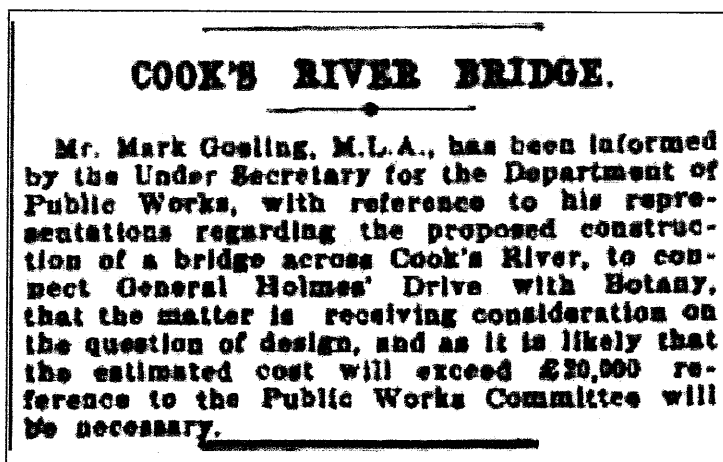
In the period 1915-1920, there are just two references (these being when the name 'General Holmes Avenue' first appears, and "a letter from the Water Board with regard to"). During 1921-1925 there are approximately twenty, while the years 1925-1929 sees an escalation to over fifty, some of which relate to the lack of a bridge – for example, the Mayor, from as early as May 1922, (with this author's italics for emphasis) "*respectfully recommends that the Department of Public Works be requested to proceed with completion of work (on the road) and also to get a punt ready for use, so that residents may be able to get across Cooks River.*"

What's a road to a river without the (permanent) means to cross it though?

Eleven years earlier, John Leitch was in no doubt as to what was necessary – "all that would be required is two miles of roadway (and) the construction of a bridge".

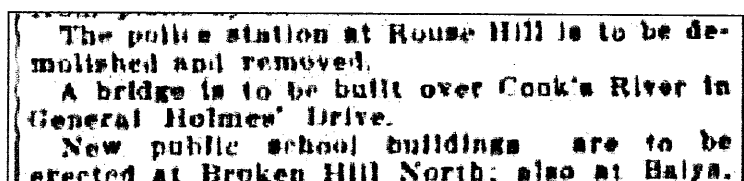
No mention then of 'a punt', however temporary, but John Leitch didn't have the Department of Public Works on the other side of negotiations as do Rockdale's aldermen whose apparent frustration with the matter is obvious as March 1923's polite request that the "Minister for Public Works be *asked* to construct a bridge over Cooks River" becomes a somewhat more terse demand to "*expedite the erection of the Bridge*" by November of the same year (again, this author's italics for emphasis).

A month later and even the tabloids have rallied to Rockdale Council's cause although, as the last phrase from this article points out, with the cost presenting a problem, "reference to the Public Works Committee will be necessary".



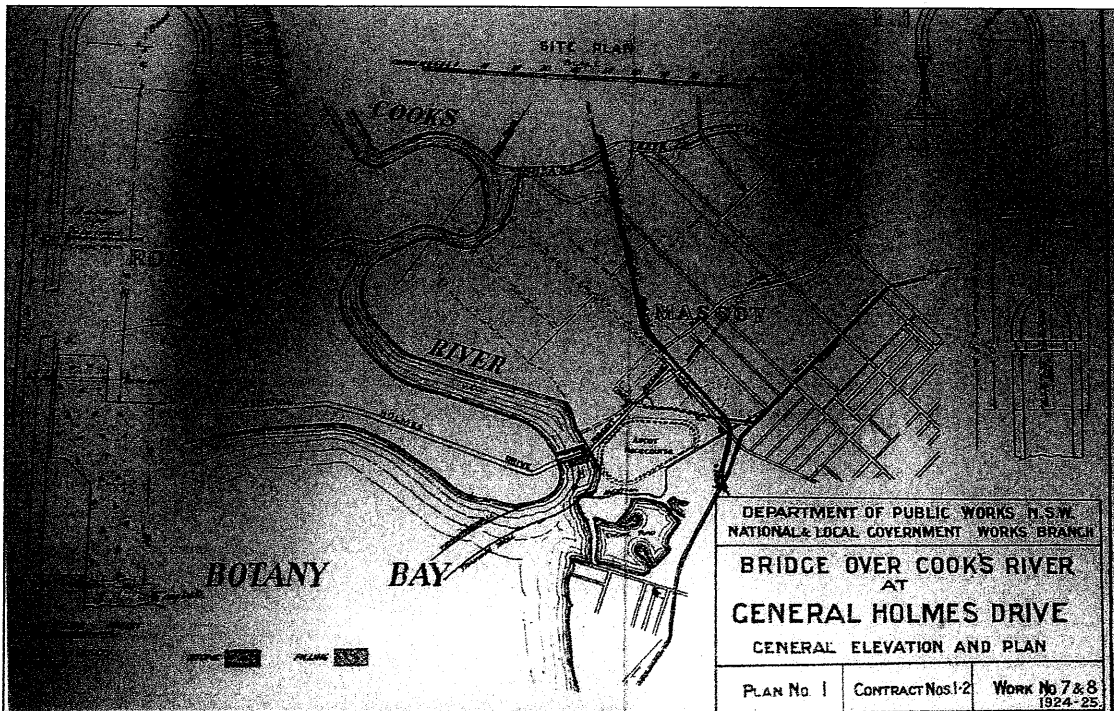
Twenty thousand pounds (at the least) is a sizeable amount: same month and Mayor Fortescue, in his address to other aldermen, details a plan whereby the Government would make a loan to Rockdale (and six other councils, all affected by the necessity of a bridge), all of whom in collaboration would construct it and make repayments over five or six years.

There is a few references to 'would' in this last paragraph – 'would make a loan', 'would construct it' – resulting in a 'who will finance it' stalemate which sees the subject goes somewhat quiet *all through* 1924 until May 1925 when The Sydney Morning Herald, in its "General Notes" column, makes the briefest of brief mentions that the bridge, finally, 'is to be built'.



And so, to August of the same year, where a Rockdale Council Alderman moves that the Public Works Department be written to call tenders from local firms with a view "of using Australian manufactures in the bridge".

For those so-minded, Rockdale Library contains *the* very contracts, specifications, detail quantities, and plans, in "Bridge Over Cooks River At General Holmes' Drive": for those where a picture will suffice, the following page contains a copy of the site plan from the same folio.



Residents shouldn't hold their breath though: *two years* on, in April 1927, after Alderman Levey motions "to write a letter to the Main Roads Board asking it to take over The Grand Parade from General Holmes Drive to Bay Street", he also feels it necessary to "point out that the bridge *would be completed* in about three months' time".

Expectations will be further tested as the wait is extended to "about five months" in an early May Council meeting: finally though, come December, 1927, there *is* at long last a bridge – only problem now is a tendency to confuse it with another nearby, and similarly named.

Alderman Keats (also President of the St. George District Ambulance) explains:

"One day recently (there were) two accidents reported, both of which gave the situation as Cooks River Bridge. The first car was dispatched to the (so-named) bridge at Princes Highway Arncliffe and the second to the new bridge over Cooks River which connects with General Holmes Drive."

No doubt the obvious would not have required much clarification but the alderman covers it regardless:

(There is an) "urgent necessity of having a different name given to (this) new bridge."

And so Rockdale Council duly writes to the Public Works Department for official endorsement of a name-change to 'Brighton Bridge', to which the reply is along the lines that the Department will retain the 'Cooks River' element and remove confusion by adding "at the Entrance" (this will change in 1951 with the name 'Endeavour Bridge' as part of the overall upgrade of General Holmes Drive to six lanes).



Whatever the interim name, Rockdale at last finds itself, after quite a lengthy wait, with a solid connection with those across the river, uninhibited by punt, albeit five or so years after the new local road was opened to traffic – and some fifteen after John Leitch's proposal first stirred the public's imagination.

During the following year (1928) Rockdale Council is notified by Government Gazette whereby General Holmes Drive (and the bridge) would from that time on be maintained, managed, and administered by Council "permanently": it might be eleven years after that fateful July day in southern Belgium when an enemy shell kills the highly-regarded, highly-respected William Holmes – his name lives on (and rightly so), as do a few others.

If nothing else, the fact that John Sulman and William Arthur Holman (the N.S.W. Premier at Holmes' side that day) are listed in the *'Macquarie A-Z People & Places'* speaks volumes; similarly John Daniel Fitzgerald (Minister for Local Government during the June 1916 deputation for the 'proposed' road) whose entry can be located in the *'Australian Dictionary of Biography'*.

However, not so easy to find is John Leitch – he does not figure again in the print media (after 1922) until 1936, and then only in connection with his wife's death notice where it should be noted that, apart from himself being deceased, he (at some point previous) was the recipient of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.)

LEITCH — November 2, 1936, passed peacefully, at private hospital Sydney, Edith, relict of the late John Leitch, O.B.E., of 104 Bourke-street, Redfern, and beloved sister of William Walker, Bowral, N.S.W.

≈

### *A Final Thought*

At a Town Planning Association meeting in July, 1920, the President, John Sulman, in remarking on the 'Greater Sydney' scheme, advises that "even if motor traffic supersedes horse traffic, Sydney can't be properly planned."

While he is referencing "access to Woolloomooloo not (being) what it ought to be", due to an approach road being "useless for heavy traffic", he could just as easily have been discussing transport from the city via Botany to Rockdale over Cooks River... *but for* the recently-named, under construction, 'General Holmes Drive'.

William Holmes and John Leitch led extremely significant lives, and were (in their own separate ways aside from their Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage years) instrumental in many areas beyond their influence on Rockdale by virtue of this roadway. While it is without argument that William Holmes should be remembered (and not only for his sacrifice in the First World War), so too should be recalled John Leitch who, for unknown reasons, somehow drifted from view.

Later generations – beneficiaries of their endeavours, trials, and tribulations – at the very least owe them that.

## *Sources*

[www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/~rmallett/Generals/Holmes.html](http://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/~rmallett/Generals/Holmes.html) (General Holmes military history)

[www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au) – various news articles dated as follows:

23/4/1901; 6/2/1902; 17/10/1905; 6/11/1905; 10/5/1908; 4/3/1910; 27/3/1912;  
28/6/1912; 15/8/1912; 7/11/1912; 27/3/1912; 9/1/1913; 22,25/4/1913;  
1,7,8,13,15/5/1913; 5/6/1913; 8/8/1913; 18,23/10/1913;13/1/1914; 11,18/6/1914;  
15/10/1914; 12/2/1916; 10/3/1916; 20/4/1916; 13/5/1916; 15/6/1916; 5,6,9/7/1917;  
7/3/1918; 30/8/1919; 2/4/1920; 21/7/1920; 3/12/1923; 10/2/1925; 20/5/1925;  
3/11/1936; 20/4/2013

### Rockdale Library:

*Rockdale Council Meeting Minutes 1915-1929*

Local Newspapers (*The St George Call*; *The Hurstville Propeller*) microfiche

*Botany – Brighton Le Sands Road* schematic

*The Parish of St. Thomas More Brighton Le Sands* (LHQ 282.944TOW.1)

*Brighton-le-Sands: The suburb that grew from the sand hills.* (994.41 BRIG)

### State Library of N.S.W.:

MLMSS209 (Town Planning Association of N.S.W.)

MLMSS420 (Town Planning Association of N.S.W. related papers 1913-23)

DQ342.91 (N.S.W. Parliamentary Papers 1921 Vol 3)

*N.S.W. Government Gazette (1918)* microfilm

Af70 (H.E.Fitzpatrick letter – rename Maroubra main avenue to Fitzgerald Avenue)

*Wilson's Street Directory 1917-1928*

[www.opengov.nsw.gov.au](http://www.opengov.nsw.gov.au) downloads 11747&11471; (*Report of Department of Public Works year ending June 1919/1920*)

City of Sydney Library Archives

Sydney Water Archives

Robert Freestone (UNSW 2009) – *1909 Royal Commission*.

Acknowledgements as detailed in preface