

# **The Origin and Building of Pemberton's Baths, Ramsgate 1918 - 1929**

**by Dan McAloon**

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*The events described herein at Ramsgate in the 1920s occurred on the lands of the Gadigal and Bidjigal people of the Eora Nation. To elders past and present, the author extends his respectful gratitude for their guardianship of the place known as Botany Bay.*

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## Introduction

When the Coles supermarket at Ramsgate Beach sold privately in December 2021 the purchase price was not publicly disclosed. What was described as “a record price” for the prime beachside property would have amounted to millions of dollars for the prize was possession of commercially-zoned land sized 4,426m<sup>2</sup> (one and a quarter acres) fronting the beach on the Grand Parade with “one of Coles best performing stores nationwide with an income of \$940,000 per year”<sup>ii</sup>, according to realty agent Cushman and Wakefield.

A development proposal is pending for a multi-storied complex on the site with a Coles supermarket once again installed as a tenant. It would continue a presence for Coles at Ramsgate Beach that started in December 1972 when the Coles “New World” supermarket first opened for business. At that time Coles was the solitary retailer at the beach, the store conspicuously built more 1.5 kilometers from the established Ramsgate shopping precinct at Rocky Point Rd, a tent peg for other shops and commercial buildings to follow replace the weatherboard and brick houses that once lined the lower part of Ramsgate Rd, transforming what is today known as Ramsgate Beach into a bustling commercial centre on the bay.

This transformation from residential to commercial hub began with Coles erecting one of its familiar flat-rooved rectangular shaped stores – a steel frame on concrete base finished in walls of prefab pebbled concrete and a north-facing wall of glass windows. The accent was on motor cars with its adjacent open-air parking. The “New World” store was marketed with a rocket ship logo as a model of convenient modern shopping. Given its service back to the local community, it may surprise the reader to learn that many St George residents greeted Coles arrival with rueful disdain, as if a wrecking ball had swung through childhood memories of happy carefree days.

What had been demolished to make way for the supermarket was the beloved venue, Pemberton's Ramsgate Baths, a pioneering aquatic centre that bestrode two generations of swimmers; the place where tens of thousands of schoolchildren had learned to swim. “Pem's” had been the highest point and best known landmark on these flatlands. It had held the corner of The Grand Parade and Ramsgate Avenue for 45 summers. Now it had floated away.<sup>iii</sup>

Unfortunately, so had its story. All that materially remained of Pem's was a handful of souvenir postcards and the briefest mention in RW Rathbone's ‘The Sans Souci Peninsula’ (2002).<sup>iv</sup>

Since 2004, the author of this essay has done much in the way of social archaeology to recover what was lost, including assembling an extensive photo archive. It is broad in-depth research— social and sports history and biographical ancestry of a family-run business. Since 2009 this work-in-progress has been previewed and enlarged by contributions made by past and present St George residents in the Facebook group ‘Pemberton’s ‘Ramsgate Baths ’on Botany Bay ’which today tallies over 1,600 members. The story of Pemberton’s Baths is now known to the author as a unique barometer and agent of social change in Sydney that arcs across the buoyant 1920s, the Great Depression, World War 2, the inflationary 50s and the booming 1960s. This book-length history is too lengthy to print here. What you are about to read instead is the origin story of Pemberton’s Baths.<sup>v</sup>

This story begins in England and New Zealand and concerns the meeting of two migrants in inner west Sydney in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The unlikely yet fortuitous friendship that develops between an English lifesaver and a Kiwi baker who probably couldn’t swim produces the legendary swimming and bathing establishment that in its lifetime saw over a million people pass through its turnstiles.



### **The Postcard and Man in White**

Arthur Ashley Pemberton, the owner-operator of Ramsgate's land-based baths, had a talent for artistry and self-promotion. Pemberton was a baker by trade who had specialised in pastries and cake making. A New Zealand migrant in Sydney, Pemberton found a niche market for his innate artistic talent of fashioning figurines of icing sugar used as ornaments for wedding cakes. The strength of this single novelty product and related designs, aided by many commercial contacts some secured through his membership in Sydney's Freemason fraternity, saw Pemberton supply the wholesale bakery sector to great commercial success. In a rented two-storey factory in Leichhardt he and a small staff produced a veritable assembly line of molded hand-finished cake ornaments.<sup>vi</sup>

The success of this business only heightened his desire to paint on a bigger, more ambitious canvas. He found it at the baths. Everywhere in the enclosed grounds was evidence of Pemberton's artistic eye, from shady picknickers' pergolas festooned with staghorn ferns, to jazz dancehalls, to jet sprays of refreshing water arcing over walkways, to towering hair-raising slippery dip rides into seawater.

At Ramsgate Pemberton was a restive creator, forever eager to bring in another novelty attraction that would lure in summer crowds. In Depression-era 1931 he installed pens of animals, birds and

fish and advertised it as a “zoo”, and in the war years bolstered its appeal with the dual drawcards of a chimpanzee and an orangutan. He filled one of the pools with live fish and charged people to come in and catch their next meal. He once displayed a rare leopard shark in the shallow pool.

As a promotion for his baths Pemberton commissioned a series of souvenir postcards that he sold at the kiosk. Each postcard featured the photo of a different pool. However, one postcard was unlike all the others because it comprised five separate photographic panels and declamatory text trumpeting the baths 'virtues' “—Most up-to-date in the state... 30,000 gallons per hour coming through sprays... Powerful electric lights for night swimming...”. Graphically this postcard is a marvel in miniature, but it is the two bottom photos showing a well-dressed crowd of officials posing for the camera that allowed the author to date the occasion precisely as September 1929 when VIP guests were invited to attend the baths re-opening and the dedication of his newest attraction “a small pool specially built for children, depth 6 to 15 inches”.<sup>vii</sup>

The subsequent newspaper report in the St George Call newspaper<sup>viii</sup> identified the dignitaries in the photo as Arthur Pemberton and his wife Sarah and their young daughter Emma standing beside Rockdale's mayor Alderman Barton and his wife, and behind them Rockdale Town Clerk Mr Somerville and his wife, and local aldermen Levey, Baxter and Depena. But in the crowd stands a big mustachioed man dressed all in white who remained unidentified. He is part of the official party but is dressed in white as if in an official uniform. A first aid man? A naval officer? He remained a mystery man until in 2020 a woman named Helene Collis (nee Jones) contacted the author to relate the story of her grandfather James Robinson Hague. Hague was a tall solidly built Englishman whose passion in life was introducing organised lifesaving to Ramsgate Beach, said Helene Collis. When Hague moved to a house in the upper part of Ramsgate Rd in 1918 he became an active force in establishing the lifesaving club at Lady Robinson's Beach.

“My grandfather built the Ramsgate Baths,” said Helene Collis, to which she added - “And I have photographs of him conducting lifesaving classes at the baths.”

“Does he wear a uniform?” I asked.

“Yes, he's dressed in white.” she replied.

The mystery man in the postcard I had pondered for years suddenly had a name.

“James Robinson Hague.”<sup>ix</sup>





*“He’s all dressed in white,” Helene Collis replied.*

### **The Originator of The Ramsgate Baths**

Arthur Ashley Pemberton’s name will always be associated with the land-based baths at Ramsgate, and for lack of any information to the contrary the assumption has been that the baths were his own creation, springing from personal enthusiasm for the sport of swimming. However, this is not so. As “Pop Pem”, Pemberton was a familiar figure in his office at the turnstile for more than forty years. “Mister Pem” as he came to be known in later years was Ramsgate’s own Methuselah, a living fixture at the entrance collecting fees even as he watched a generation of kids grow to adults, marry, and bring in their own children and grandchildren for swimming lessons.

And yet there was a conundrum about Pemberton too. A pastry chef and cake decorator by trade, a light manufacturer settled with his family in Leichhardt, why would such a man make a U-turn in life and risk everything on the expensive venture of building an aquatic venue that was seasonal in nature, hard to upkeep and labour intensive?<sup>x</sup>

On his Ramsgate beachside property Pemberton might just as easily have built tea rooms and a kiosk for seaside picknickers or a block of flats. Why a baths? Pemberton’s second-born son Albert William Pemberton (1918-2015) in conversations with the author conducted from 2004 provided

many pertinent details about the family's involvement in the running of the baths but when pressed about his father's motive for investing in the land-based baths at Ramsgate, Albert Pemberton's reply remained curiously vague " –Dad had a friend, an Englishman lifesaver who gave him the idea for the baths." Albert replied. When pressed for more details, Albert Pemberton countered that he did not to know the name or identity of this inspiring lifesaver. This was not true.<sup>xi</sup>

As an old man then in his late eighties, Albert's contribution to my historical investigation of the baths was to ensure that his father's legacy as a pioneering business entrepreneur who "put Ramsgate on the map" be preserved.<sup>xii</sup> Albert, born in 1918, had grown up in the halcyon days of the baths and was fond of saying the swimming competitions and learn to swim classes and socialising that happened there was the only reason anyone in Sydney came to know about Ramsgate. But by his omissions on any subject he did not wish to discuss Albert Pemberton was selectively remembering the past as if to steer any future telling of the history of the baths.

Albert's interviewer however had regularly attended the baths in his boyhood in the 1960s as a swimmer in the North Ramsgate Amateur Swimming Club. I knew perfectly well that the baths reflected a faded antiquity in the harsh sunlight of that time. Swimming as a competitive sport is about timing accuracy. Championship races are won in hundreds of a second; the length of a fingernail can be the difference between a swimmer winning in a world record time or coming in second place. All competition swimming is in fact an eternal race against the clock.

Since the mid-1930s, the standard in world swimming competition races has been an Olympic-class pool of 50 metres length (55 yards). Yet the main pool at Ramsgate was only 50 yards long, unacceptable for NSW Amateur Swimming Association carnivals. So it was that in the 1960s St George district swimming carnivals were held at the new municipal pools at Sans Souci and Carss Park. However ever since Pemberton had installed his first pool in 1924 there had never been the desire on his part to lengthen the pool to match the standard for competition. Although this was technically possible at Ramsgate, it did not seem a concern of management under Arthur 'Pop' Pemberton, even as newer pools took away his best swimmers. In a phone conversation one day, Pemberton's only surviving son Albert Pemberton made a stunning admission - "Dad didn't swim. In my whole life I only ever saw my father in the pool twice."<sup>xiii</sup>

This statement was a challenge to my search for the origin of the baths. The idea that a man who did not swim should devise a swimming centre he had no personal use of struck me as an affront. At the same time that it fell into disregard as a swimming venue, Pemberton had kept installing extraneous

add-ons of caged monkeys, birds and fish; elements foreign to any other swimming venue anywhere. But why build a baths, if not for the love of it?

In insisting on his own version of the past, Albert Pemberton was inadvertently ensuring that the definitive book about his father's establishment could not be completed. The book that Albert wanted me to write had no concrete foundation, it moved around like seagrass with his father as King Neptune calling the tunes. When Albert Pemberton died in 2015 at age 97, this line of inquiry with the last living Pemberton was extinguished forever. However, ten years later the phone call from Helene Collis took my research in a new and unexpected direction.<sup>xiv</sup>

This conversation was all about origin of the baths. Helene Collis is the last surviving of three daughters and a son born to George Harold Jones and his wife Nellie (nee Hague), a daughter of James Robinson Hague. Helene, who was born in 1945, described the Hagues and Jones as intimate associates of the Pembertons, involved in the business from the outset. Helene's mother Nellie Jones had worked for decades as a maker of cake ornaments in Pemberton's Leichhardt factory, and later when it moved to new premises at Ramsgate. Prior to building a house at 66 Alfred Street, Ramsgate, George Harold Jones and his family had resided in the upstairs flat built above the baths foyer. This flat was the first home to Helene's older sister, Enid, born in 1930. Although there was a gap of six years between them, Enid Jones and Pemberton's daughter Emma were best friends as children. Helene Collis' father was a talented man named George Harold Jones who was Sydney born in working-class Glebe. As a young man Jones had been an amateur boxer and had travelled inland to work on sheep stations. He was much prized for his ability to "fix anything mechanical" including farm machinery. Always useful with his hands, at Ramsgate George Harold Jones was employed by Pemberton to make running repairs on the collection of penny arcade machines Pemberton kept in the baths' foyer.<sup>xv</sup>

Jones was also employed as a watchman in the off-season, and most dramatically had once challenged a burglar breaking into the downstairs refreshment room by firing a revolver at the intruder – apparently missing the person, who was able to run off into the night.<sup>xvi</sup> Pertinent to this essay is that among his other interests Jones was an enthusiastic amateur photographer who documented the social milieu at Ramsgate in the 1920s and 30s. His photos survive to this day.

In a Jones family photo album are photos taken by George Harold Jones that record social events shared by the Jones, Hague and Pemberton families. There are also Jones' photos of Jones father-in-law James Robinson Hague in his white singlet and pants conducting lifesaving drill classes on a sandpit inside the Ramsgate baths. But most incredible of all are photos that Jones snapped in the



winter of 1926 that show Arthur Ashley Pemberton and James Robinson Hague standing side by side amid the gang of workers who are building the second large pool at Ramsgate.<sup>xvii</sup>

Research into the biography of James Robinson Hague has revealed his importance to the baths being built at all. Hague was an English migrant, a large robust man, a devout Congregationalist and a teetotaler who was an exponent of clean living and physical fitness; very fit, a strong swimmer and a lifesaver with diploma, he was recognised as an instructor by the NSW Royal Life Saving Society. When James Hague arrived in Ramsgate in 1918 and moved his family into a newly built brick bungalow at 29 Ramsgate Road, he was at once active at the fledgling Ramsgate Swimming and Life Saving Club at Lady Robinson's Beach.<sup>xviii</sup>

What emerges from recent research is the picture of a partnership between two men, Hague and Pemberton. It was a symbiosis in a common cause of building a radical 'modern' baths. Pemberton was the man of means who was looking for a business opportunity to invest in; James Hague was the idealistic visionary set on creating a safe place to teach swimming and lifesaving on Botany Bay – a stillwater pool that would be an alternative to the existing tidal baths at Sans Souci. If what constitutes 'an originator' as being someone who has an idea and undertakes a task that others may finish, James Robinson Hague may best be described as the originator of Pemberton's Ramsgate Baths. This essay will lay out the facts in this thesis and illustrate with hitherto unpublished photographs.

### **Hague and Pemberton – in Leichhardt and Ramsgate**

The first ever mention of Arthur Ashley Pemberton in the Sydney press was a captioned photograph in The Sun newspaper of 23 December 1915 showing him posing beside a 110 pound, three-tiered Christmas cake decorated with elaborate icing sugar figurines. The wartime theme of the cake decorations was the unity of the British Empire, showing the British bulldog, The British lion and Australian kangaroo surrounded by the flags of the Allies. Pemberton had made the cake while employed as a pastry chef at the Bourke Street Police Barracks in Redfern. The cake, so the news story relates, is to be donated by the police to WW1 soldiers convalescing at the Randwick military hospital.<sup>xix</sup>

There is poignancy in the image of a giant cake baked for the benefit of wounded ANZAC soldiers as within 18 months of the photo being taken Pemberton would receive tragic news from his family

in New Zealand that his older brother, Albert William, also a baker, and enlisted as a private in the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces had been killed in action in Belgium. By the time the news reached Pemberton he had left his job with the police to set up his own specialist cake business in a factory at 51 Reuss Street, Leichhardt. It was in Leichhardt that Pemberton made the acquaintance of an older man, James Robinson Hague. Hague and his wife Ellen and daughters were living in a cottage at 50 Rolfe Street, Leichhardt a mere five minutes' walk from Pemberton's cake ornament factory.<sup>xxxxi</sup>

The Hagues were immigrants from the town of Darwen in Lancashire, England. During a severe economic downturn in Lancashire's manufacturing industry James Robison Hague's work as a dray driver for one of the paper mills dried up. Unemployed, in 1910 he made the difficult decision to leave Ellen and his three daughters Lizzie, Sadie, and Nellie, and voyage to Sydney, New South Wales in the hope of finding better work prospects. In Sydney he became a delivery driver and storeman for a timber merchant in Annandale, probably also working for Pemberton in the factory on a casual basis. Hague wrote letters home to Ellen expressing his love and affection while praising the sunshine and opportunities in Sydney. In 1912 he received the sad news that his father Joseph Hague had died. Joseph had been by trade a baker in steady employment. As his only son James Robinson received an inheritance from his father's estate. Hague now had the fare for his family's passage on a steam ship and the family were reunited in Sydney, setting up a household in the rented house in Rolfe Street, Leichhardt.<sup>xxii</sup>

It is at Leichhardt that James Hague and Arthur Pemberton formed a friendship that would have life consequences for each. When they met in 1916 Hague was aged 44, and Pemberton 30. In appearance they were physical contrasts. James Robinson Hague being a large solid man over six feet tall with a powerful physique, a broad chest, and bushy moustache. Arthur Pemberton by comparison was short and already tending to be stout as is often the case with cooks who have a sweet tooth. Although they met in Sydney as migrants from different parts of the world the men had similar backgrounds. Both were from aspirational lower middle-class families with fathers who were bakers by trade. Both had fathers who were born in England, Pemberton's father Albert William in Liverpool and Hague's father Joseph in Darwen, near Manchester. Pemberton's father, Albert William Pemberton and his wife Emma had migrated to New Zealand in the 1860s lured by the inducement of the New Zealand government that new settlers should receive generous land grants in their newly adopted country. The Pemberton family were granted 100 acres – but they decided to live on a small farm acreage at Panmure, close to Auckland. Here the Pembertons raised their ten children.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Arthur Ashley was the couple's second son, born on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1886. But life was not easy for the boy. By the 1880s New Zealand was thrown into severe economic depression – 20 years of muddling misery that is today referred to 'the long Depression'. Now the New Zealand government was introducing anti-immigration legislation to keep out ethnic groups seen as undesirable. Simultaneously New Zealanders began to leave their country to seek a better deal in Australia. Pemberton senior, however, enjoyed steady employment as a maltster for the Handcock Brewing company.<sup>xxv</sup> The family farm gave provided sustenance, but those older children were expected to find work and bring in an income. At age 10, Arthur Ashley had left the local school to work as a farm labourer in a vegetable garden. He resumed schooling for a time, but records note how one month after his 12<sup>th</sup> birthday he left school again "for work", ending his formal education.<sup>xxvi</sup> His earliest dream of being a jockey at Ellerslie Racecourse came to a dead end as he was not lightweight enough. In its place he followed his older brother Albert William into the baking trade. Prior to coming to Sydney he had worked on trans-Tasman steamers as a baker and pastry chef. His last berth was on the SS Allamorowa plying the Tasman Sea between New Zealand and Australia. He worked in this job for 18 months until he disembarked in Sydney Harbour and took a baker's job with lodgings at the NSW Police Academy in Bourke Street, Surry Hills. The academy was home to hundreds of police cadets in training and they were provisioned by a large commercial kitchen manned by permanent staff. In this work situation Pemberton specialised in cake baking and decorations. His flair for concocting cake ornaments in ice sugar for elaborate celebratory cakes attracted many compliments and commissions. An older baker David Coggins encouraged Pemberton to make up samples of his cake ornaments to show to the trade. The response was so positive that the two men set up the manufacturing factory in Leichhardt, opening in 1917. From the outset Pemberton's name defined this new business which he registered as 'AA Pemberton and Co. Wedding Cake Ornaments'. He was 31 years old.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Pemberton met Hague in Leichhardt a friendship is formed between the two men. After years of working as a salaried employee with the police at the Redfern barracks, Pemberton was enjoying success in his own business. He is making good profits supplying materials to the wholesale baking trade across Sydney. Ever more contracts to supply came when Pemberton aged 31 joined the secret fraternity of Freemasonry initiated as a Master Mason at the Leinster Marine 2 Lodge at Castlereagh Street, Sydney.<sup>xxviii</sup> Thereafter the growth of Pemberton's business was exponential. Customers included cake makers Henry Berry, Mauri Brothers and Thompson, Irelands 'Cakes, the Sergeants shops called "Thistle Cakes", David Jones, Anthony Hordens, Mark Foys, McDowell's, McIlwraith's, and others across the Sydney basin and as far away as Newcastle.

James Robinson Hague by contrast was the more altruistic personality of the two men. A teetotaler and non-smoker, Hague's interests were physical fitness, swimming, and lifesaving. A strong swimmer, as a young man in England he had trained in lifesaving techniques under instruction of the Royal Life Saving Society. Hague was enthusiastic for the future of lifesaving in Sydney because the sandstone topography with many and varied waterways and beaches brought the city's residents into contact with surf and rivers and all the hidden perils therein. Going to the beach in summer had already been woven into the recreational lifestyle of Sydneysiders. James Robinson Hague's dream is that he might teach Sydney's children to swim and master lifesaving techniques that would prevent unnecessary drownings. To this end Hague joined the New South Wales Royal Life Saving Society.

When Hague's father Joseph Hague died in Darwen he had received an inheritance sufficient to buy a block of land at Ramsgate and have a brick bungalow built at 29 Ramsgate Rd. One of James Hague's motives in moving to the beachside was to become involved in forming a lifesaving club on Botany Bay, a project supported by NSW RLSS. When the Hague family became Ramsgate residents in 1918, James found employment as a ganger on the steam tram service from Kogarah station that ran along the Sans Souci peninsula to Sandringham Beach.<sup>xxix</sup>

At Ramsgate Hague became an advocate for and instructor in lifesaving on Lady Robinson's Beach. He was an initiator of and leading figure in the committee that formed the first lifesaving club at Ramsgate. The club was affiliated with NSW Royal Life Saving. Its first clubhouse was in a wooden building donated by Rockdale Council located on Cook Park reserve. This first club was named the Ramsgate Swimming and Lifesaving Association.

The social impact of the new lifesaving club in Rockdale municipality was immediate. People had long swum in the sea off Lady Robinson's Beach but always in fear of shark attack. Patrols at the beach by the new club were first reported in The Propellor newspaper 1922 story 'Ramsgate Life-Saving Club' on 7 April 1922. A glowing story in the St George Call newspaper praised the work the volunteer lifesavers in patrolling the beach popular spot with picnickers on weekends. The new club held its sports events on Sundays and "each member of the club is making himself proficient in the noble art of the Life Saving Society." The story stressed the outstanding community service the club gave in setting out flags for bathers and the peace of mind granted from a watchman with field glasses on duty "in a newly erected look-out tower scanning the waters for any danger that may be lurking in the vicinity" – that is, sharks. Should a shark be spotted "a warning is given by the

ringing of a loud bell.” Significantly the story mentioned examinations for the Bronze Medallion and Award of Merit for endurance will be conducted henceforth at the Sans Souci Baths, overseen by officials from the Royal Life Saving headquarters.<sup>xxx xxi</sup>

James Robison Hague could plainly see the potential for a better swimming pool than the Sans Souci tidal pool right there at Ramsgate Beach. Walking to the clubhouse from his home on Ramsgate Rd required Hague to walk through the largely vacant blocks of land of the Lloyd Estate, a sub-division on the flatlands of what is known today as Ramsgate Beach. On the wide section named The Boulevard where land developer Thomas Holt MLC had planned to make a town centre for a seaside village named ‘Scarborough’, Hague appraised the optimum site for a land-based baths on the corner opposite the Ramsgate beach. On this site he imagined a bathing complex such after the large stillwater baths at the famous English seaside resort of Ramsgate. Having the inspiration for this infrastructure but lacking the finances to buy the land, let alone build his dream project, Hague sought out his entrepreneurial friend Arthur Ashley Pemberton at Leichhardt.

Arthur Pemberton by his own admission had a “flourishing business”<sup>xxxii</sup> manufacturing cake ornaments at Leichhardt and as a result was on extremely friendly terms with his bank manager at the Annandale branch of the Bank of New South Wales. Pemberton responded positively to Hague’s ambitious proposal and bought the parcel of land at Ramsgate Beach, consolidating five quarter-acre blocks into one large development site, and submitted a proposal to Rockdale Council to build a private bathing facility on it. He organised the first of two bank loans of several thousand pounds from the Annandale bank, mortgaging the Ramsgate property as collateral. Meanwhile, Pemberton and Hague sought out an engineer able to design this new aquatic centre. It was to be a challenging build as it had to overcome the issues associated with excavating and building large reinforced concrete pools in sand in open weather with the presence of groundwater a mere three metres below the sand.

After much searching an engineer named James Waddell, a resident of Blaxland in the Blue Mountains, accepted the task. As for the related matter of convincing Rockdale Council and the NSW Lands Department to grant permission for Pemberton to access seawater through pipes laid under Cook Park and reaching to the high tide at Lady Robinson Beach these were formally approved in April and May 1924. We may well infer James Hague’s advocacy of a new stillwater baths as a training base for Ramsgate volunteer lifesavers would have been received endorsement with Scarborough ward’s aldermen.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The ensuing build at Ramsgate occurred in two stages – the first pool – 50 yards long and 33 feet wide – was constructed in the winter of 1924 and opened in September with great fanfare and a swimming carnival and participation of swimmers and divers from the Sydney Swimming Club as well as the local Ramsgate Swimming and Lifesavings Club. The second large pool and a two-storey building containing a foyer, kiosk and refreshment rooms with an upstairs residence was built in 1926, ready for the swimming season in September that year. Both Pemberton and Hague were part of the construction gang.

### **Building the Ramsgate Baths – a Partnership**

Besides attending to his business in Leichhardt, A.A.Pemberton had personal reasons to delay his family's move to Ramsgate. It was not until 1928 that a house was built for him at 107 Alfred Street, Ramsgate, by local builder and Scarborough ward alderman Peter Depena.

In 1925 however there is an important family events that required Pemberton to remain in Leichhardt – it was the year in which his father Albert William snr died in Panmure and in May of the same year his father-in-law Aaron Marks also died.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The latter sad event preceded preparations underway for Bar Mitzvah of his eldest son Henry Lewis Pemberton. In the Jewish tradition the Bar Mitzvah is the ritual ceremony whereby a Jewish youth of about 13 year of age comes to adulthood. As preparation for the big event Lew Pemberton had been studying at the shule at the Newtown Synagogue, as well as practising the recitation in Hebrew of a passage from the Torah which he would read at the ceremony. The loss of his devout grandfather, a steady guide in his studies was a blow to Lew. It is necessary to say that in an age where anti-Semitism was common it was not generally known that the Pemberton sons, Lewis and later Albert, were initiated as Jews. The background is that their father Arthur Ashely had married into a Jewish family.

The Marks family were Arthur Pemberton's in-laws. Aaron and Julia Marks and their three daughters Amelia, Annie and Sarah were another immigrant story in the melting pot of multicultural Sydney. The Marks arrived as immigrant Jews from Germany in the late nineteenth century and settled in Surry Hills near the garment district where they opened a tailoring shop. They later moved to a house at 128 Elswick Street, Leichhardt. But it was in Surry Hills while working at the police barracks that Arthur Ashely Pemberton fell in love with the youngest Marks daughter Sarah.



Although Pemberton was a Christian in the Anglican tradition, his love for Sarah Marks was enough for Aaron Marks to find a dispensation to admit this gentile into his devout Jewish family. Seeing that the couple could not be dissuaded in their romantic intentions Aaron gave his consent to the marriage between Arthur and Sarah on condition that the children be raised in the Jewish faith. Despite the obstacle of religious strictures forbidding a marriage between Jews and non-Jews, the union of Arthur and Sarah Pemberton took place on February 7, 1912, in the Great Synagogue, Elizabeth Street, Sydney, officiated by the Chief Rabbi.<sup>xxxv</sup> As a non-Jew, Arthur Pemberton had pledged to raise his children in the Jewish faith which is passed on through Jewish women. The Pemberton's first child a boy, Henry Lewis, was born in November 1912. Before the family relocated their household to Alfred Street Ramsgate, Henry Lewis Pemberton had celebrated his Bar mitzvah at Newtown synagogue, on Nov 7, 1925.

Moving his family to Ramsgate opened a new chapter in Pemberton's life, even as his mixed marriage was a fact only shared with close friends.

During the same period, in Ramsgate, James Robinson Hague's devotion to the cause of lifesaving was being celebrated, tested, and rewarded. In August 1924, Hague, nick-named "Genial Jim" by his associates at the Ramsgate Lifesaving Club was thrown a surprise party at the club house to honour of his achievement in successfully winning the Diploma of the NSW Royal Life Saving Society - only the nineteenth recipient of this honour in NSW in 32 years and an outstanding achievement and inspiration in the young Ramsgate club. To commemorate this auspicious occasion club members presented Hague with a gold signet ring with the date inscribed.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

A month later Hague was asked to officiate as a guest speaker at the official opening and first swimming carnival held at Pemberton's Baths. The occasion drew a crowd of 700 people with swimmers and divers from many clubs competing in swim races and diving exhibitions. The Mayor of Rockdale Alderman Fortescue was presented with a golden key on the day as he declared the baths to be officially opened. Speeches were made by Mr Les Duff, the Secretary of the NSW Amateur Swimming Association, and by James Robinson Hague, representing the NSW Life-Saving Society. We do not have a copy of Hague's speech but can guess that he praised Pemberton's enterprise as the fulfilment of his deepest desire to see a stillwater venue for learn-to-swim and lifesaving in the Municipality of Rockdale.

Hague's request to Royal Life Saving Headquarters to send representatives to the inaugural carnival had been reciprocated in strength with members of the North Steyne Surf Lifesaving Club making the long journey to Ramsgate to demonstrate lifesaving and resuscitation techniques to the crowd.

Junior swimming races on the program had been organised by the NSWASA who had asked schools in the St George district to enter their best swimmers for elimination heats for best in the 33 yards and 50 yards sprints. It was significant that the only club to compete under its own banner on the day were the boys and girls of the Ramsgate Swimming and Lifesaving Club. Several weeks later, on Saturday 1, November 1924, came another stellar accolade when the club hosted an exhibition swim in the new pool by the famous Andrew 'Boy' Charlton, winner of the gold medal in the 1500m freestyle race at the Paris summer Olympics, in only his second appearance since returning from the Games. To everyone's delight Charlton declared the new pool very good.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

But the real test of endurance for James Robinson Hague came in an act of personal bravery carried out in January 1925 when he swam to the rescue of a boy, aged 11, who had been carried offshore by strong currents at the old wharf on Sandringham Beach. Hague, nearly 53 years old, had been supervising the unloading of trucks at the Sandringham tram sheds when he was alerted to the emergency happening on the beach. In an example of athletic prowess, he ran 200 yards to the water's edge and dived in fully clothed to swim out and rescue the boy who was by then struggling in deep water. "But for this prompt rescue the boy would probably have drowned" wrote the St George Call newspaper, noting that a woman had previously drowned at the same spot<sup>xxxviii</sup>. Modest about his heroics, James Robinson Hague was nonetheless feted for his fearless actions and presented with two bravery awards for saving the boy's life. He had ably demonstrated in the most dramatic manner the practical applications of lifesaving on Botany Bay.

Hague was later to instruct his young lifesavers at the Pemberton's Baths. In its grounds they would practise resuscitation methods and in the pools water rescues. He was later the manager of the baths. George Harold Jones' photos of the period show social events like picnics where the Pemberton and Hague families are grouped together, and in another image, two little girls dressed in fancy dress standing outside the baths. The girls are the Emma Pemberton and Enid Hague, daughter of Arthur Pemberton and granddaughter of James Hague. The girls would stay lifelong friends. Emma would be bridesmaid at Enid's wedding, and after World War II their friendship would continue with their growing families in the south coast town of Sussex Inlet.<sup>xxxix xl</sup>

But the most revelatory photographs by George Harold Jones are those he took in June 1926 as the second large pool and the two-storey building were being constructed in the off-season in readiness for the opening of the 1926-27 swimming season. For the first time we can see images of the large empty pools with their new white tiled sides gleaming in the sun. The second pool, commonly known as The Ladies Pool, is still under construction. Wheelbarrows and discarded form-work litter

the edges. In one group photograph the building crew is shown grouped together in front of wooden frames that will become a section in a row of dressing room-lockers built against the southern wall. The names of these men, dressed in their work clothes and hats, is mostly unknown today as the people who might have identified them are all deceased. However, the faces of two in the group are indeed recognisable. The small man in the cloth cap and the big burly mustachioed man are Arthur Ashley Pemberton and James Robinson Hague. There they are, large as life, doing the manual teamwork of building a venue that would become a sports and leisure institution in the St George district. Here at last is photographic proof of the partnership that built the Ramsgate Baths.

### **The Photographs of George Harold Jones –**

The photos in this section were taken by James Hague's son-in-law George Jones in the mid- 1920s. Images include the construction of the second large swimming pool and two-storey main building in the winter of 1926, and social photographs of the Hague and Pemberton families, and of Hague and Pemberton working in the crew that constructed the second large pool.



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## Endnotes

- ii 277 The Grand Parade, Ramsgate Beach, sold on 24 December 2021  
Cushman and Wakefield Sydney  
<https://www.commercialrealestate.com.au/property/277-the-grand-parade-ramsgate-nsw-2217-2017147599>
- iii The address of the Ramsgate Baths in 1924 was 261 Cook Rd and later 277-78 The Grand Parade (in 1934 the length of coastal road from BLS to Sandringham known variously as Cook Road or the Esplanade or Carruthers Drive was consolidated into The Grand Parade. Later, between 1947-50 the street numbers for the Grand Parade changed). The cross street where the Baths stood in the Scarborough sub-division map circa 1866 is named 'The Boulevard' and during the life of the Baths was 'Ramsgate Avenue', and today is called 'Ramsgate Road' (when, in fact, historically it was not a continuation of this narrower upper road being separated from it by Scarborough Park): from Rockdale Council Records
- iv The Sans Souci Peninsula by R.W. Rathbone (Book House Publishers 2002) pp.30-32; and postcards held in Bayside Local History Studies, Rockdale Library
- v The author has been researching Pemberton's Baths since 2004. His definitive essay 'A Short History of the Ramsgate Baths 1924-70' was the winning entry in the Rathbone Prize 2009, and a copy is held in Rockdale library. Much information has been added to this publication since that time.
- vi The building where Pemberton had his cake ornament manufacturing business from 1917 to 1951 still exists at 51 Reuss St, Leichhardt.
- vii The postcard 'Ramsgate Baths 1930a' in the Josef Lebovic Collection is held in the National Museum of Australia, Canberra.
- viii Re-Opening of Ramsgate Baths, The St George Call, p.5, Fri 13 Sept 1929
- ix Helene Colliss, formerly Helene Jones, born 1945. Daughter of George Harold Jones and Nellie Jones ( nee Hague). Interviewed by the author in 2021.
- x Albert William Pemberton ( 1918-2015), son of AA Pemberton was an oral source on the background of the Ramsgate Baths and his family.
- xi From interviews with Albert William Pemberton, 2004-2010.
- xii Albert William Pemberton quoted in 2004.
- xiii Albert William Pemberton quoted in 2009.
- xiv Death notice for Albert William Pemberton of Redcliffe Qld, died 7 October 2015, Metropolitan Funerals.

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<sup>xv</sup> Interview with Helene Collis, 2021.

<sup>xvi</sup> 'Shots fired at Thief' p 10, SMH 10 Sept 1931.

<sup>xvii</sup> Collection of photographs by George Harold Jones held by his descendants, accessed through his daughter Helene Collis.

<sup>xviii</sup> Collection of George Harold Jones photos.

<sup>xix</sup> The story and picture appears in The Sun newspaper 23 December 1915.

<sup>xx</sup> Private Albert William Pemberton (1884-1917), NZ Expeditionary Forces Killed in Action, Belgium 21 June 1917.

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TC19170621.2.17>

<sup>xxi</sup> Helene Collis. The house the Hagues resided at Rofe Street, Leichhardt, still stands.

<sup>xxii</sup> Helene Collis and parish records from Darwen, Lancashire.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Pemberton background in NZ provided by Frances Battersby, a Pemberton family member, granddaughter of Thomas Neale Pemberton, brother of AA Pemberton

<sup>xxiv</sup> for historical information on NZ Long Depression 1885 to 1900, see

<https://teara.govt.nz/en/history-of-immigration/page-10>

<sup>xxv</sup> AW Pemberton's profession at Handcock Brewing is related in an unpublished memoir 'Life' by Thomas Neale Pemberton

<sup>xxvi</sup> New Zealand school records search, Auckland

<sup>xxvii</sup> From interviews with Albert Pemberton, 2004.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Pemberton's membership of the Freemasons Leinster Marine 2 Lodge was confirmed by NSW Freemasonry archivist in 2004 "a brother in high regard"

<sup>xxix</sup> Hague's employment with the Sans Souci tramways was confirmed in the 1925 stories related to his rescue of a drowning boy.

<sup>xxx</sup> One of the earliest references to the Ramsgate Lifesaving Club appears in The Propellor newspaper, 7 April 1922.

<sup>xxxi</sup> The St George Call newspaper April 1922.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Leader, October 7, 1960 "Personality of the Week".

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Permission to access the baths site via Cook Park Reserve and Lady Robinson Beach from the Dept of Lands and RMC are mentioned in RMC minutes for meetings 22 May 1924 and 11 Sept 1924, with the council conferring with the Dept of Lands that Pemberton may lay his pipes to extract seawater from Botany Bay



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<sup>xxxiv</sup> Death notices for AW Pemberton of Auckland and Aaron Marks of Leichhardt (died May 12, 1925) appear in the obituary pages.

<sup>xxxv</sup> The marriage notice for AA Pemberton and Sarah Marks appears in the Hebrew Standard of Australasia, 2 February 1912, p.7; birth notice for son Henry Lewis Pemberton on 7 November 1912 appears in a later edition.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Story of the surprise party in honour of JA Robinson held at Ramsgate Lifesaving Club appears in The Propellor Newspaper, 1 Aug 1924, p.3

37 Opening of the Baths is recorded in The Evening News, Sept 23, 1924.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> The St George Call, December 1924.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> The Propellor, 'Saved from Drowning' Friday 23 January, 1925

<sup>xxxix</sup> Photos of George Harold Jones, 1926.

<sup>xl</sup> Emma Pemberton married George Sjostrom and moved to Sussex Inlet, NSW.