Booralee

The Lost Fishing Town of Botany

The Jones family in the yard at Luland Street, Botany, 1940s-1960s. *Courtesy of Clarence Jones.*

Researched and written by Joanne Sippel
Curator -George Hanna Memorial Museum
City of Botany Bay
Exhibition held from 2 May 2003 to 31 October 2003.

 Botany Historical Trust
Locked Bag 10
Maroubra NSW 2035

Published by City of Botany Bay Council
RRP $49.50 (includes GST)

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ISBN *to be assigned*

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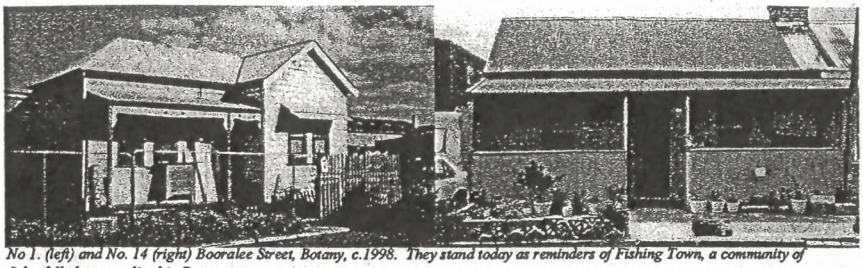


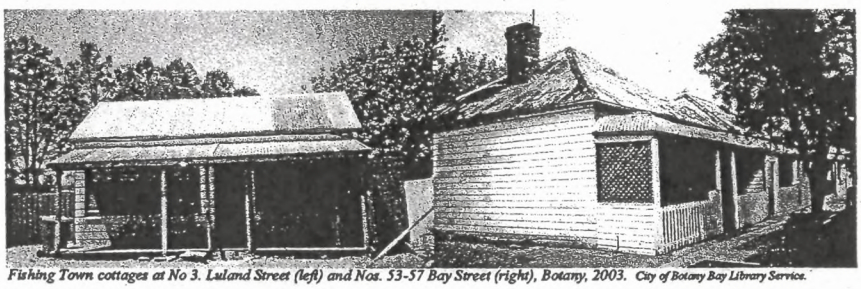
No 1. (left) and No. 14 (right) Booralee Street, Botany, c.1998. They stand today as reminders of Fishing Town, a community of fisherfolk that once lived in Botany. Courtesy of Jim White.

Fishing Town was centred around Booralee, Luland, Hale and Bay streets in Botany. It stood on the foreshore of Botany Bay and near the mouth of the Cooks River. The weatherboard cottages that still stand in some of these streets are the only remaining fragments of a fishing village that began to emerge in the early 1800s and thrived for over 100 years.

As early as 1819 the waters of Botany Bay were said to supply Sydney abundantly with fish. In the early 1880s it was still considered to be Sydney's most productive fishing ground. These were the boom times, when the industry was young and fairly unregulated and the supply of fish, prawns and oysters was still plentiful.

Fishing Town harboured a lively community of fishermen and their families. Many of them were descendents of English, Scottish and Welsh fishing folk. Families such as the Bagnalls, Duncans, Johnsons, Jones, Puckeridges, Smiths and Thompsons lived off the land and sea, removed from the bustle of Sydney, in an isolated rural community on the shores of Botany Bay.

A close-knit community developed and down through the generations many of these families inter-married. The whole of Fishing Town was like one big family and the Bay kept them together. The Bay's bountiful supply of seafood let these families support themselves and make a living for generations.



Fishing Town cottages at No 3. Luland Street (left) and Nos. 53-57 Bay Street (right), Botany, 2003. City of Botany Bay Library Service.

These fishermen supplied Sydney fish markets well into the twentieth century. The Bay had been heavily fished for 100 years and by 1920 the era of prosperity was ending. Later descendents took other employment in local tanneries and woolwashes or moved away from the area altogether.

In the later part of the twentieth century the development of the Port and Airport facilities changed the Bay forever. Fishing Town was eventually cut off from the beach and Cooks River. Pressure from industry and urbanisation took its toll. The last of the fishermen left Fishing Town in about 1979 but the built fragments and family memories remain.

The children of the last fishing families remember their relaxed lifestyle, the beautiful beach, being close to nature and the sense of freedom. This exhibition will bring Fishing Town to life again by piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of historical records and memories of descendents. Here is a recreation of the Lost Fishing Town of Botany.

Listed Fishing Boats in Botany - 1880

H. Bagnall, J. Bagnall*, C. Brown, A. Derwent, J. Derwent, Duncan, Goldsmith, Grant, Johnson, J. Mosley, C. Parker, C. Smith, J. Smith, J. Sparks, F. Thompson, F. Wood

names sourced from the Fisheries Inquiry Commission, Report of the Royal Commission, 1880, Minutes of Evidence, p.20.

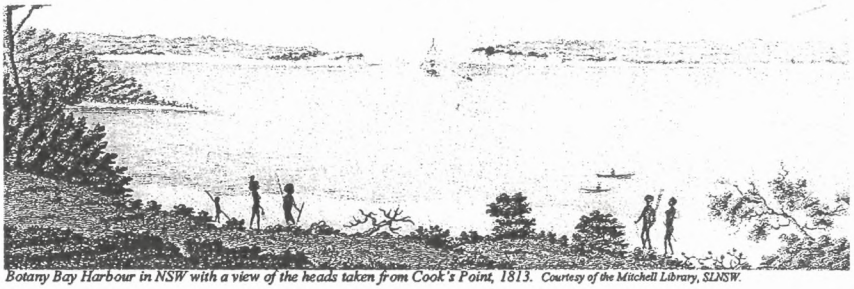
Licenses Issued Under the Fisheries Act
Botany Fishermen - 1883

Joshua Bagnall*, William Duncan*, Thomas Duncan, Thomas Frenchy, Charles Gilbert, James Gilbert, Herbert Goldsmith, William Goldsmith*, Arthur Hammond, Charles James, George Johnson*, James Johnson, Stephen Jones*, Peter Moloy, Thomas Morris, Thomas Mosely, William Mosely, Charles Parker, Henry Parker, James Parker*, Joshua Parker, Richard Potter, John Richardson, William Richardson, James Smith, John Smith, Joseph Smith, John Sparks*, George Sweetman*, Frederick Thompson*, George Thompson, Fred Wood Snr*, Fred Wood Jnr*, Stephen Wood

***also have a fishing boat license; plus George Parker Snr**

names sourced from the Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, 1883, Report from the Select Committee on the Working of the Fisheries Act of 1881, Appendix, A5, pp 48-50.

Booralee - The Kameygal Hunting Ground



Botany Bay Harbour in NSW with a view of the heads taken from Cook's Point, 1813. Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, SLNSW.

Imagine a landscape of swamps, marshes and woods, a river flowing out into the Bay, a long beach of mud flat and sand, the waters teaming with sea life. This was 'Booralee' - the hunting ground so named by the indigenous people who lived on the banks of the Cooks River before Europeans arrived.

The Kameygal subsisted on a rich diet of sea food, land animals and bush foods. Aboriginal middens once lined the banks of the Cooks River and held the shell remains of oysters, cockles, whelks, turbans, abalone, mussels and pippis, as well as the bones of schnapper, bream, catfish, flathead and groper.

The men fished from shore or in canoes with spears made from the grass tree, ending in three or four prongs tipped with shark-tooth or bone. Women used fishing lines made from plant fibre or hair with a shell hook - made from the turban shell. Small fires in the canoes were used to cook fish as they were caught and to provide light for night fishing.

When Captain Cook sailed into Botany Bay in April 1770 he observed the Kameygal people fishing from their canoes. He also saw many stingrays in the shallow waters and initially named the bay 'Sting-ray Harbour'. His crew hauled a net and caught many fine fish, more than they could eat. They dined on leatherjackets, sting rays and oysters.

From Mud Bank - Botany Bay - Mouth of the Cooks River, 1830, by John Thompson. Courtesy of the Dixson Library, SLNSW.

When Captain Phillip returned with the First Fleet in May 1788 he found Botany Bay an inadequate harbour for the Fleet and quickly moved north to Port Jackson. It was not long after Sydney was established that the life of the Kameygal was disrupted forever. A smallpox epidemic in 1789 halved the indigenous population.

Europeans soon encroached on the area around Cooks River, attracted by the wooded land, the fish and the deposits of oyster shells. They soon commandeered the fishing resources. By 1881 a group of only 15 aboriginal people were reported living on the reserve at Botany and another group of 35 at La Perouse camp. These camps were visited by the Botany Senior-Constable, John F. Byrne. He supplied them with rations. Sometimes they came to Wiggins' grocer shop on Botany Road to collect their tea, sugar and flour.

"Botany - To the aborigines there have been given boats and gear, fishing-tackle, some clothing, food, materials for building five houses or huts." (NSW Legislative Assembly, Report of the Protector of Aborigines, 1883, p.1)

The Protector of Aborigines, George Thornton, issued aid to the aboriginal people at Botany but by 1883 the people on the Botany reserve had been moved to a mission station at Milgoa.

Entrance of Cooks River, Botany Bay, 1840, by Henry Curzon Allport. Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, SLNSW.

A Delightful Fishery on the Cooks River

TO be SOLD by PRIVATE CONTRACT, and entered on immediately, the under-mentioned valuable FARMS, containing 30 Acres each.—The most of them are Cleared—Granted by His EXCELLENCY GOVERNOR MACQUARIE; situate in the District of Botany Bay, distant five Miles from Sydney, and has a Government road leading to the spot.—Those Farms are known by the name of Sea View, and Newcastle, and has the advantage of commanding a full Prospect of the Ocean between Botany Heads, and is noted for Stock, particularly for Horses, on account of an extensive Salt Marsh, and possesses a delightful Fishery which supplies the Country abundantly with fish.—It is also situated on the Banks of Cook's River, and famous for all manner of Sport.—There is a good Country House, which can be repaired at a trifling Expence. For particulars apply to Mr. Andrew Byrne, the Proprietor, O'Connell-street, Sydney; whose only reason for disposing of the Premises is, his intending to remove into the interior.

Sydney Gazette, 1819, p.2. *Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, SLNSW.*

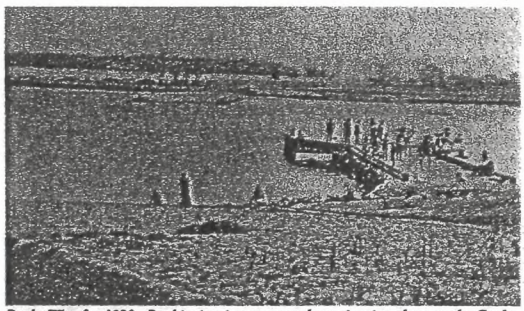
In 1809 Andrew Byrne, Mary Lewin and Edward Redmond were granted land on the Cooks River. Byrne cleared his land for timber, raised horses and also collected the oyster shells from aboriginal middens. These shells were burnt to extract lime which was used to make mortar for the building trade.

A lime kiln was built on Cooks River and the lime was transported by small boats to Sydney. Two of these boats were named the 'John' and the 'Raven Raby'.

The Puckeridge family were early fishermen and limeburners and settled in the area around 1830. They kept their boats on a wharf in the Cooks River near the Engine Pond which became known as 'Pucks Wharf'.

William Puckeridge (b.1802) was a limeburner and brickmaker who settled in Botany and one of his sons, James Puckeridge (b.1842) also became a limeburner.

William's brother, John Puckeridge (b.1804), was net fishing in the area from about 1830-1880 along with ten other fishing boats. He used to catch Garfish in the Georges River and he also employed a man to collect oysters which he sold to the popular oyster bars of Sydney.



Pucks Wharf, c.1920. By this time it was a popular swimming place on the Cooks River for local residents. *Courtesy of Debbie Brejniak.*

James Puckeridge, Limeburner of Botany, and his wife Jane (nee Croallen), c.1900. *Courtesy of Debbie Brejniak.*

The large mud oysters from Botany Bay were abundant and taken into Sydney from the 1820s but their existence was soon under threat from over-dredging - not only from oystermen but from limeburners. In 1868 a £10 fine was imposed for anyone found burning live oysters for lime but this was hard to enforce.

In 1880 John Puckeridge thought it was shameful the way the oysters had been destroyed in Georges River and Botany Bay. By 1896 the mud oysters of Botany Bay were declared extinct.

"Sydney, it is true, need not be at all alarmed for the supply of oysters in her market, for no sooner is the wealth of one river exhausted than the dredgers can turn to another...which has not yet been rifled." *(The Sydney Mail, Saturday, September 9, 1871, p.893.)*

The idea that the fish supply could never be depleted seemed a common one. Fishermen harvested the waters of Botany Bay as if there were no tomorrow.

John Puckeridge admitted he was the first man to destroy the stocks of Garfish by netting the full width of the Georges River - an illegal practice from 1865.

William Rolfe (b.1820) was another Botany fisherman during the 1840s. He also collected shells for the limeburners but soon left for the goldfields. He returned to take up market gardening.

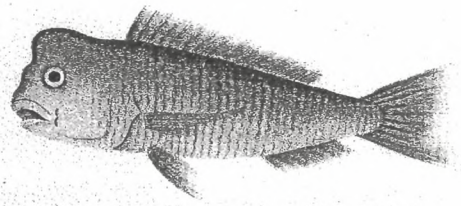
James Puckeridge and his wife Jane (nee Croallen) with family members at 93 Baxter Road, Mascot, c.1913. Standing L-R: Henry, Leslie, William, Charles (father of two young children); Seated L-R: Cecil, Thomas, James, Jane and children Frederick and William.
Courtesy of Debbie Brejniak

1880 Fisheries Inquiry Commission

Throughout the nineteenth century a series of Acts were passed in the NSW Parliament to regulate the fishing industry. These Acts limited the length of fishing nets as well as the mesh size, allowed for the closure of fishing sites which were being overfished, regulated the size of fish caught and banned dubious fishing practices. A major overhaul of the Fisheries Act occurred in 1881 after an inquiry into the industry was held.

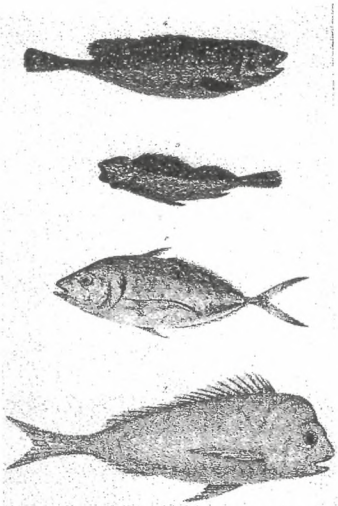
"Botany, though never equal to the Long Reef and Broken Bay grounds for school-fish, has always held its own for net-fish; indeed it is doubtful whether even Broken Bay, with its far greater extent of net grounds, has ever been or is now more productive than are the beaches and flats of Botany. This inlet, though shallow, covers many thousand acres of water, and as two salt-water rivers - George's and Cook's - flow into it, there is no lack of spawning or nursery grounds....Of course the processes of exhaustion common to all the grounds near Sydney have been in active operation at Botany, and especially that most destructive of all forms of fishery the stake-net; yet notwithstanding all this, Botany is perhaps less impoverished considering the amount of fishing continually going on than any inlet or harbour within fisherman's distance of Sydney. But the evidence of witnesses well acquainted with the resources of Botany leads immediately to the conclusion that, unless arrested by legislative restraints, these prolific grounds will in a very short time succumb to the stake-nets and the small mesh as surely as our other fishing-grounds have succumbed." (Fisheries Inquiry Commission, 1880, p.25.)

In 1880 the NSW Government held an investigation into the state of its fisheries. At this time Botany Bay was considered one of Sydney's most productive Home Fisheries, an area that stretched between Broken Bay in the north and Port Hacking in the south. Port Jackson had been overfished by constant unregulated netting and it was feared that the same could happen at Botany Bay unless new and more effective regulations were enforced.



A Schnapper from a sketch by Captain John Hunter of the First Fleet, c.1790. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, from The Hunter Sketchbook.

Extensive Schnapper grounds were reported off Botany Heads but the majority of fishermen plied their boats within the Bay. The Georges and Cooks River were perfect nursery grounds and fish in the Bay were still plentiful, despite an increase in fishing boats and some dubious methods of fishing.



4. Rock Cod 5. Gumett 6.Trevally or Cavallia 7. Schnapper, from a watercolour painting by T.R. Browne, 1813. Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, SLNSW.

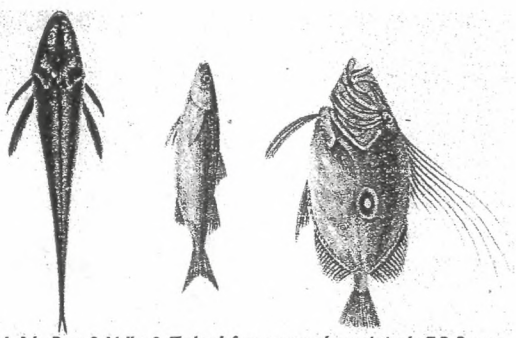
The main catches were Bream, Mullet, Garfish, Blackfish and Whiting. Sole was abundant in the Cooks River channel at Christmas time and stingrays were plentiful in the shallow waters of the Bay. Trevally, Leatherjackets, Flathead and Tailor were also caught and occasionally Flounder, Pike and Mackerel.

Sharks were often caught in the fishing nets and if killed did not go to waste. Shark fin found a ready buyer on the Chinese market and an excellent oil was extracted from the liver - to be used like cod liver oil. Its skin was also in demand for leather-like uses and the flesh, although seldom eaten, was described as nutritious as beef or mutton.

Stake-nets had been banned in the Fisheries Act of 1865. Despite this, it was a fact that "stake-netting" or "stalling" took place in Botany. Staked nets, sometimes a mile long, were set up on the mud flats inside the low-water mark and when the tide fell, the fish were trapped on the sand banks. Fishermen then just picked up the fish they wanted but left the rest to rot.

Other dubious methods of fishing that were banned were the liming and dynamiting of fish in tidal waters whereby the fish were poisoned or stunned for an easy catch.

The Fisheries Act of 1865 was a modest set of rules, regulating all fishing nets to 30 fathoms (54m) and imposing fines of £5 for stalling and £20 for liming. The new Fisheries Act of 1881 tried to control the fishing industry more effectively. New rules imposed an annual fee of 10s for fishermen and £1 for a boat licence. The greatest impact to Botany fishermen was the closure of the Georges River in winter. However, in practice the many new rules of the 1881 Act sometimes seemed like a Comedy of Errors that actually did more harm than good to the fishing industry.



1. John Dory 2. Mullet 3. Flathead, from a watercolour painting by T.R. Browne, 1813. Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, SLNSW.

1881 Fisheries Act - A Comedy of Errors

"The Act has not fulfilled the expectation of the framers; it has lessened the supply of fish, especially of some kinds; it has been no protection to our oyster-beds, nor does it hold out sufficient encouragement for oyster culture; it has placed unwise restrictions on an important industry and worked very harshly and oppressively to those engaged in fishing for a livelihood." (Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, 1883, Report on the Working of the Fisheries Act of 1881, p.3.)

SECOND SCHEDULE.

Lawful Weights for Fish.

	Description of Fish.	Weight in ounces avoirdupois.
Marine ...	Schnapper or Red Bream	16 ounces.
	Bream (Black)	8 "
	" (Silver)	4 "
	Blackfish	8 "
	Rock-cod (Black or Red)	8 "
	Gurnet...	4 "
	Flathead	8 "
	Mullet—	
	Sea [including the variety commonly known as hard-gut mullet]	12 "
	Flat-tail	4 "
	Sand	4 "
	Whiting	4 "
	Flounder	4 "
	Sole	4 "
	Pike	8 "
	Travally	8 "
	Garfish	3 "
	Lobster (or Crayfish)...	16 "
Fresh-water	Cod (or Murray Cod)	16 "
	Perch	4 "

Legal Fish Weights specified in the Fisheries Act of 1881. In 1883 it was recommended that some of these legal weights should be reduced, such as the legal Garfish weight being reduced to between 1.5 - 2 ounces.

If a fisherman was found to have an illegally sized net, it would be seized immediately, depriving him of his only livelihood. Nets were not cheap to replace, a small one was worth £20 and larger nets at least £50.

"A net was seized for being too short. It was locked up in the Fish Market, and the fisherman's wife and children were actually starving. Eventually he got an order to go and take his net, after it had been lying there two months. I cannot for the life of me understand how the net being too short would do any harm." (Richard Seymour, Inspector and Auctioneer of the Sydney Fish Market, Minutes of Evidence, 1883, Report on the Working of the Fisheries Act of 1881, l.134.)

"In one part of the Act it specifies that I am only to use a garfish net to catch garfish, but when I throw the net out I do not know what I may catch. I might haul in a load of bream, but under the Act, I would have to throw them away if the Inspector came down on me to seize me [even if they were the proper legal size]." (Frederick Woods, Botany Fisherman, Minutes of Evidence, 1883, Report on the Working of the Fisheries Act of 1881, l.10.)

"I have known fish to be seized that did not come under the Act at all. I have known that to be done repeatedly with tarwhine, the weight of which is not mentioned in the Act....I have known Botany fishermen to lose several bushels of fine large bream for only having a dozen or so of small tarwhine among them; the whole of them have been seized. I thought it one of the cruellest things I ever saw....nearly £10 worth of fish [seized]." (Richard Seymour, Inspector and Auctioneer of the Sydney Fish Market, Minutes of Evidence, 1883, Report on the Working of the Fisheries Act of 1881, l.115-123.)

Apart from the obvious problems of special nets for certain types of fish, the legal size of the mesh in a Garfish net was so big that it virtually ensured that none were caught at all, hence their scarcity at the fish market. The same was true for the mesh size specified for Whiting.

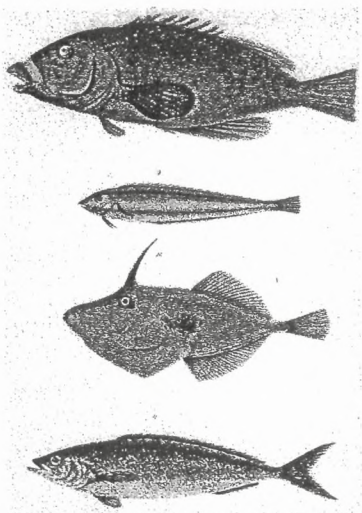
"Can you catch garfish with an inch-and-a-half net?" "No, they go through it. I would like some of your gentlemen to go with me and see it. I might surround a school of garfish with the net allowed by the present Act, and not catch a bucket-full." (Frederick Woods, Botany Fisherman, Minutes of Evidence, 1883, Report on the Working of the Fisheries Act of 1881, l.15.)

The regulations of the Fisheries Act of 1881 seemed like overkill. Even the regulations to protect the oyster beds seemed over the top. Just what sort of people were oysterbeds attracting in 1881?

"An Inspector, or any office of police or constable, may apprehend and lodge in custody any person found removing oysters from any Recreation Reserve in a bag or other vessel or receptacle other than a bottle, and for his own consumption, or found wantonly destroying any oysters on such reserve, or conducting himself theron in a disorderly manner, using profane, obscene, or disgusting language, drowning or destroying dogs, goats, cats, or any animal whatsoever, or depositing any dead carcase on, or within one hundred yards of such reserve; or exposing his person, or annoying the residents or passer by." (Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, 1881, Fisheries Act 1881, p.4, para.36.)

In the face of such restrictions and harsh penalties, several Botany fishermen sought employment outside the fishing industry as scavengers because they could not make a living under this system.

Recommendations were made for fishery inspectors to only patrol closed fishing waters and otherwise look at fish sizes and weights when they arrived at the market. If the latter was policed well it was seen as unnecessary to inspect nets in the open fishing grounds.



8. Groper 9. Parrot Fish 10. Unicorn Fish or Leatherjacket 11. Salmon, from a watercolour painting by T.R. Browne, 1813. *Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, SLNSW.*

An important change in the Fisheries Act Amendment Act of 1883 was that the illegal nets of fishermen were now confiscated only on a second offence.

The Families of Fishing Town

The Smith family were prominent in Fishing Town. Charles Smith Snr (b.1811) had arrived in Sydney as a convict in 1831. He was a carpenter from Southwark (London) who had been sentenced to seven years transportation for stealing tools. After he gained his certificate of freedom he became a fisherman at Botany.

Charles Smith Snr built 'Pine Cottage' at the bottom of Booralee Street, facing Botany Bay. Such weatherboard cottages had to resist the fierce southerlies that blew in across the Bay. He married Jane Hunter in 1840 and their nine children were born in this house.

Their two sons, Charles Jnr and James, both became professional net fishermen. Several of the daughters married into other local fishing families. Mary Ann married Frederick Wood; Isabella married George Johnson; Sarah married John Sparks; and Susan married William Duncan.

John Sparks and his wife Sarah (nee Smith), c.1920. Courtesy of Marjory Smith.

Frederick Wood and his wife Mary Ann (nee Smith), c.1860. Courtesy of Wallace H. Russell.

It was during this time that the subdivision of the Booralee Township took place in 1859. A close-knit and prosperous community was emerging in Booralee Street on the shores of Botany Bay as these fishing families reaped the rich sea harvest during the lucrative 1860s and 1870s.

Charles Jnr (b.1845) entered the fishing trade with his father at the age of fourteen. By 1880 he had seen a tremendous increase in the number of boats fishing continuously on Botany Bay and was certain that this accounted for the scarcity of fish.

"I recollect when I first went fishing there was a very fine season, and down about the Waterworks there was a school of mullet. A gale of wind came on at the time. The roe was half hanging out of the fish, and they would not go away." (Charles Smith Jnr, Botany Fisherman, Fisheries Inquiry Commission, Report of the Royal Commission, 1880, Minutes of Evidence, p.19, 1.999.)

Charles Jnr was a very successful fisherman and keenly observed the life of the Bay. He knew Mullet would come in for protection during a storm and had observed the effect of floods, what he termed 'freshes', when fresh water washed into the rivers, leaving a great many fish floating dead.

He fished for Mullet in April but they could always be caught on the flats and in the rivers. Winter was the Garfish season in the rivers and he went after whiting in September, followed by catches of Sole in the Cooks River at Christmas time. He sold his catches to the fish markets in Woolloomooloo.

A 3.

RETURN OF FISH SOLD.

RETURN showing realizations for Fish sold on behalf of Mr. Charles Smith, of Botany, at the Eastern Market, Woolloomooloo, from the 8th May, 1874 (that being the date of the first appearance of his name in the Market books), to 31st December, 1879.

Months.	1874.		1875.		1876.		1877.		1878.		1879.	
	No. of days' work.	Realizations.	No. of days' work.	Realizations.	No. of days' work.	Realizations.	No. of days' work.	Realizations.	No. of days' work.	Realizations.	No. of days' work.	Realizations.
		£ s. d.		£ s. d.		£ s. d.		£ s. d.		£ s. d.		£ s. d.
January	..	....	14	64 5 3	16	56 16 6	16	71 15 6	16	79 5 3	17	72 14 9
February	..	....	14	80 18 9	15	58 6 0	13	46 11 0	15	72 15 6	17	114 3 8
March	..	....	14	76 7 0	18	66 17 0	18	96 13 0	14	85 14 3	19	121 15 8
April	..	....	14	63 1 6	14	59 9 6	15	213 10 6	17	116 9 3	14	119 9 6
May	18	£3 3 9	14	69 10 3	15	53 17 6	11	65 16 0	19	118 13 6	15	197 13 6
June	6	26 18 6	11	41 9 0	19	83 8 6	11	42 18 0	9	68 11 6	16	201 0 6
July	12	38 15 11	10	22 12 6	11	52 3 0	10	52 9 6	7	64 4 6	17	222 6 9
August	6	24 15 11	7	15 11 0	11	61 9 0	12	58 2 3	20	208 13 0	16	184 16 9
September	13	42 5 9	13	52 6 3	12	49 16 6	12	43 16 3	11	119 10 3	11	88 4 9
October	15	41 0 3	13	41 4 6	12	49 10 6	15	80 19 6	14	84 10 9	16	70 12 6
November	13	32 7 3	17	41 13 3	10	46 19 6	19	63 16 0	13	50 12 6	14	88 5 6
December	13	42 7 3	11	53 6 6	14	61 11 6	12	79 11 3	15	61 13 0	18	53 10 3
	88	323 14 6	152	543 4 3	158	774 7 0	164	754 12 9	170	1,210 19 3	190	1,554 0 6

ABSTRACT.

No. of working days from 8th May to 31st December, 1874	...	...	...	...	...	...	88
Do.	do.	do.	do.	in the year	1875	...	152
Do.	do.	do.	do.	do.	1876	...	158
Do.	do.	do.	do.	do.	1877	...	164
Do.	do.	do.	do.	do.	1878	...	170
Do.	do.	do.	do.	do.	1879	...	190
					Total	...	922

							£ s. d.
Realized by sale of fish from 8th May to 31st December, 1874	...	...	...	...	...	...	323 14 6
Do.	do.	do.	do.	in the year	1875	...	543 4 8
Do.	do.	do.	do.	do.	1876	...	774 7 0
Do.	do.	do.	do.	do.	1877	...	754 12 9
Do.	do.	do.	do.	do.	1878	...	1,210 19 3
Do.	do.	do.	do.	do.	1879	...	1,554 0 6
					Total	...	£5,160 18 8

Statistics for the fish catches of Charles Smith Jnr from 1874-1879. From the Fisheries Inquiry Commission, Report of the Royal Commission, 1880, Appendix 3.

William West and Martha (nee Sparks) sit in the middle row far right holding their baby son, Bill West. Their daughters, Lillian and Elsie West, sit third and fourth from the left in the front row. The Sparks were also a fishing family and had married into the Smith family in the second generation. Martha was the daughter of John Sparks and Sarah (nee Smith). Lillian West married Henry Duggan and their daughter Marjory married back into the Smith family when she married Bertie 'Duker' Smith - a fourth generation Smith descended from Cuthbert. Courtesy of Marjory Smith.

Another early fishing family was the Duncans. John Duncan was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, in around 1828. At twelve years of age he was convicted of theft and in 1840 he was sent to the juvenile prison at Point Puer in Tasmania for seven years. After his release John made his way to Botany Bay where he made a living gathering shells for the limeburners from 1848.

In 1849 John married Margaret Walker. Margaret was sixteen years old and had apparently run away from home. They were married by the Reverend James Samuel Hassell at St Peters Anglican Church. They already had one son at the time of their marriage and had a further eleven children. They lived on the Cooks River Road (now the Princes Highway, St Peters), a community which Rev. Hassell described as genteel in comparison to the fishermen who lived at Botany.

"I have never had since a worse class of people to deal with than were some of the old fishermen at Botany and the charcoal burners between Georges River and Cooks River. The district was as wild and godless a place as I have ever known, although so near Sydney." (Reverend Hassell, as quoted in St Peter's Anglican Church, Cooks River, 1838-1988.)

Despite Hassell's opinion, they were hard-working people and very self-sufficient. Apart from their rich diet of fish, most of them had fruit trees and chickens in the backyard. Seafood would be swapped for vegetables from Chinese market gardeners and with rabbits from the rabbitoh. Not much money changed hands.

The men fished seven days a week when the fish were in the Bay. The women had lots of work to do. Apart from raising a family of ten or so children, helping to mend nets and preparing fish for sale, they often went out to work cleaning houses.

Many children of the first families went into the fishing industry. They learned to sail at an early age and although Botany Bay was a dangerous place, they knew how to read the tides and the weather.

William Duncan, a son of John and Margaret, married Susan Smith in 1874. According to family history, Susan nursed an ill seaman back to health and in return he gave her an orchid. She passed this down to her daughters and family descendents still grow this orchid today.

In 1882 John and Margaret moved north to the Newcastle area with most of their children but some, like William, stayed in Botany.

John Sparks Jnr and Cuthbert Smith dressed up as cowboys, c.1905. They were the third generation of the Smith fishing families. Courtesy of Helen Smith.

Research is continuing into the other fishing families who lived in Botany. If you have any relevant information or photographs please feel free to contact the Curator of the George Hanna Memorial Museum. With further information we can piece together many more stories from Fishing Town, a unique local community.

'Bull' Thompson at 34 Luland Street, now demolished, c.1993. Courtesy of Jim White.

Esther Thompson (nee Harris), c.1920. Courtesy of Maurice Saxby.

Peter Anderson was a fisherman from the small Scottish fishing town of Pittenweem where he had a big business catching and smoking fish. He moved to Australia in 1884 and lived in Booralee Street, Botany. He was a net fisherman on the Bay, catching fish and prawns.

Gabriel Thompson, a convict sentenced for seven years, arrived in 1824 from Norfolk, England. After gaining his Certificate of Freedom in 1831 he established himself as a builder in Ultimo. His son, James Thompson, was a fisherman at Botany. He married Esther Harris in 1879 and they lived at 22 Luland Street. Frederick Thompson (possibly the brother of James) is listed as a fisherman in the 1880s and he lived at 3 Luland Street, Botany.

Some of the Thompsons married into the Puckeridge family. John Thompson married Alice Puckeridge and their daughter, Doris Thompson, married William McLaughlin in 1929. They lived at 12 Booralee Street, Botany, and later John and Alice moved to 34 Luland Street which was occupied until 1999 by family descendents.

The daughter of James and Esther, Gert Thompson, married Alexander Thompson (no relation), 1920s. Courtesy of Maurice Saxby.

James and Esther Thompson (nee Harris), of 22 Luland Street Botany, c.1935. Courtesy of Maurice Saxby.

Henry Jones and Elisabeth (nee Parks) had eleven children. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

Arthur 'Luke' Jones, son of Henry and Elisabeth Jones, c.1925. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

Shooting the Haul

A fictional recreation of shooting a haul at Towra point, c.1913. Written by John Smith

Charles had pulled the rudder on board and pinned the six-foot wooden roller into its slots at the stern. Claude and Harold had reefed their rolled trousers as high up the thigh as they could preparing to get over the side. The pale skin of their upper legs revealed their native origins and looked strangely out of place with the dark tanned skin below.

Their rolled shirt sleeves sometimes told the same story above their swarthy forearms and leathery hands. But the heavy cottons and wools that they invariably worked in were often needed to provide full length protection against the vicious swarms of mosquitoes, especially out on this southern side or near the mangroves.

In a moment they were over the side with their britchens held high above the wet. The end of a coil of rope was tossed off the back to Claude and he stood there watching the boat draw away. His dangling line soon disappeared into the few feet of retreating water and reappeared a few feet behind the out-going boat, wriggling and dancing off of the wooden roller in a frenzied or mocking hilarity.

The game was on; fishing was hunting and gambling. They'd seen a couple of mullet jump but it was too early for the big schools and they were probably looking at a mix of trevally and bream, it was a bit of pot shot this time. But you never know.

Cuthbert pulled as hard and fast as he could on the two shorter front oars while his father kept an eye on the diminishing coil of rope. As the last exuberant yards of rope charged off the coil and out over the stern, Charles quickly took up the beginning of net and just as the rope jerked back against its weight, he took the tension for a second and then hurled it into the bay. On that cue the rest of the net was lifting and floating off of the pile in sheets, spread across the full width of the roller and into the bay. The corks skipped and jumped as they hit the spinning roller on the top and leads thudded into and over it on the bottom.

Cuthbert kept the boat heading straight out as his father touched here and there in the shooting pile while he assured himself that it wasn't likely to snag, no little sticks or tangles and then enough draw from the water would take over any hitch. In a few more moments he signalled to Cuthbert to turn guide the boat into an arc. Before long they were travelling parallel to the beach. He had a few seconds to look inside, to see a mullet jump or the darting, shimmering pattern that a few bream or blackfish might cause in shallower waters. Then with one eye on the net, one on the water and another on the course they steered her about and into a long curve leaving only a line of bobbing corks across the surface of their sneaky trap below. The net would run out 400 yards and its curtain of Irish cotton mesh would hang 8 feet deep.

Back on the bar the two men had hitched on with their britchens and were beginning to back up as they calculated that the distant boat some 500 yards from them had reached the end of the net and was laying off an incoming coil of rope. They drew steadily on the tension of the outgoing tide as they leaned back into the leather britchens around their hips. A few hundred yards up the beach the boat was coming back onto the bar.

Cuthbert stowed the oars and snatching up his britchen he was over the side with the end of the coil of rope they had just dropped into the bay. Charles was moving about in the boat and getting ready to drop an anchor over. Before long he had joined Cuthbert on the line and the four of them began slowly working against the enormous weight of the net and the ropes in the outgoing tide.

This was it now for awhile. Cuthbert was still catching his breath as he leaned into the rhythm of these short backing steps with his father, the net and the entire volume of Botany Bay stretched out before them in the morning light and the sharp sun, all the way home to the other side. For the next hour or more they would stay in this pattern. As they moved in little backwards steps they also moved sideways, towards the other two men and gradually the floating rope they had retrieved stretched out on their flanks and lay on the sand above the retreating tide. It was a long hard haul against outgoing water, but with two men on each side they were relaxed and comfortable.

The distant pairs of figures grew gradually larger each to each and the stillness of the hot February air began to change in puffs of later morning breeze. Some mullet had already meshed in the wings but it wasn't mullet darting about in the water between them, it was trevally and maybe a few bream. So they pulled it in hand over hand into piles. Then they'd drag it sideways towards each other five or six paces at a time, before handling it into another bundle on the wet sand. By that time they were only about ten yards apart and Charles was off down the beach again, to get the boat.

He'd already moved the boat twice, lest it go aground. And this time he was poling it up the deep towards them as they finally scooped the boiling, trashing catch into a net cage. They held the bottom line down with their feet and the corks up with their hands as they waited for the boat to be maneuvered into position outside the circular trap. The water thrashed, sprayed and splashed in bursts as the hapless catch darted madly about beneath and then raged at the surface.

In a deep scooping motion two of them would force a basket through the throng and lift it as high as they could, the water draining furiously through it. At the end of their reach and their strength Charles grasped it from within the boat and all three steady it on the gunnel until it drains right out and Charles tips it spilling the fish into the middle of the boat. As they tumble from the basket he is quick to snatch a few undersized sorts and hurl them out the other side. Then as they go for another basketful he frantically flicks through the first, tossing out anything that's too small or not worthwhile.

The process is repeated again and again until they are done. Twenty baskets and it is a good haul. The boys know it is an easy day.

Uncle Percy's Eulogy - A Sea Shanty Waltz

written by John Smith, nephew of Percy Smith

On cold and wet nights the men of Botany
Climb on their boats and push out to sea
They sit on a dig
They plan on the tide,
And inside their hearts, their secrets they hide

Chorus *Singin' ho we go fishin', for the schools we snare*
We shoot out our nets and we haul them in here

And we never speak, of the things that we fear
For that's not our way in Botany my dear

In starlit warm summers on the waters we go
In our broad open boats, cross the weed beds below
We watch for winds changin' on the bay's other side
And inside our hearts, our secrets we hide

I remember my father, and his father too
They once caught the great shark
For Taronga Park Zoo
And they thought it so funny,
Although the thing died
But inside their hearts their secrets did hide

Chorus *Singin' ho we go fishin', for the schools we snare*
We shoot out our nets and we haul them in here

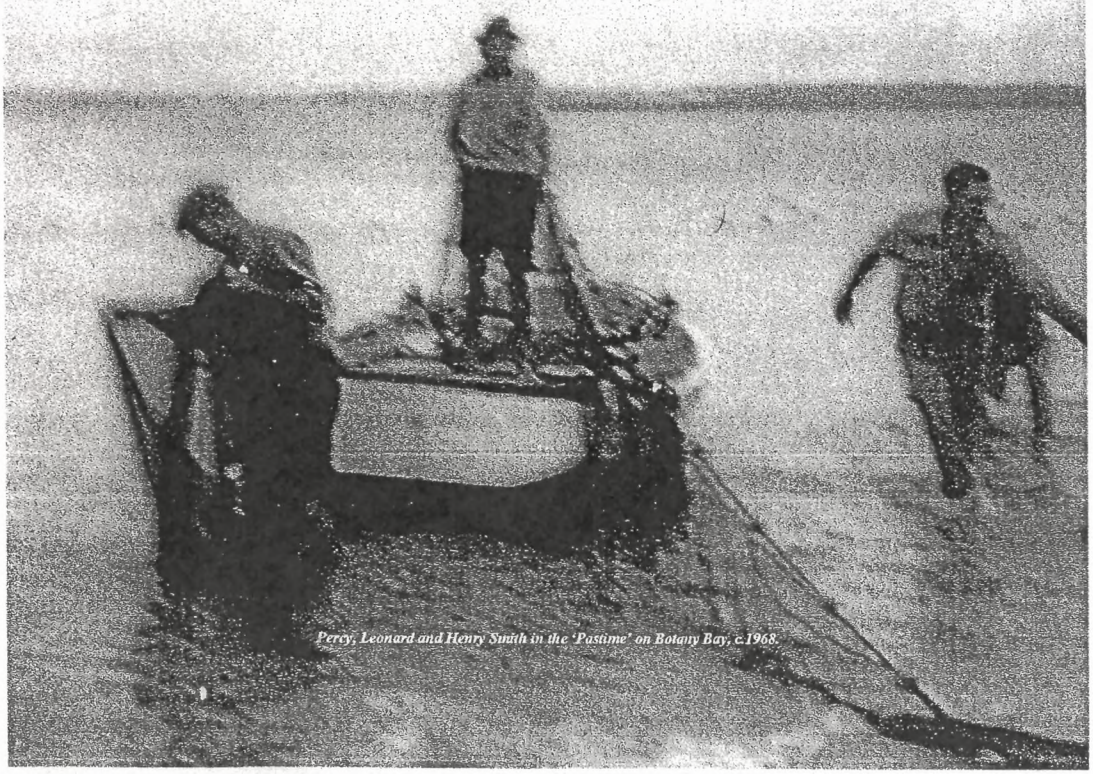
And we never speak, of the things that we fear
For that's not our way in Botany my dear

As time slipped away, and the fish disappeared
The waters of Botany were dying, they feared
So they packed up their homes
And the village was cleared
To make way for the workers, and factories

So I'm left now to wonderin'
As I lay in my bed
Just what were the mysteries, they kept in their heads
Or as I sit there, by the waters alone
I remember their saying 'take care of your own'

Chorus *Singin' ho we go fishin', for the schools we snare*
We shoot out our nets and we haul them in here

And we never speak, of the things that we fear
For that's not our way in Botany my dear



Percy, Leonard and Henry Smith in the 'Pastime' on Botany Bay, c.1968.

Family Traditions

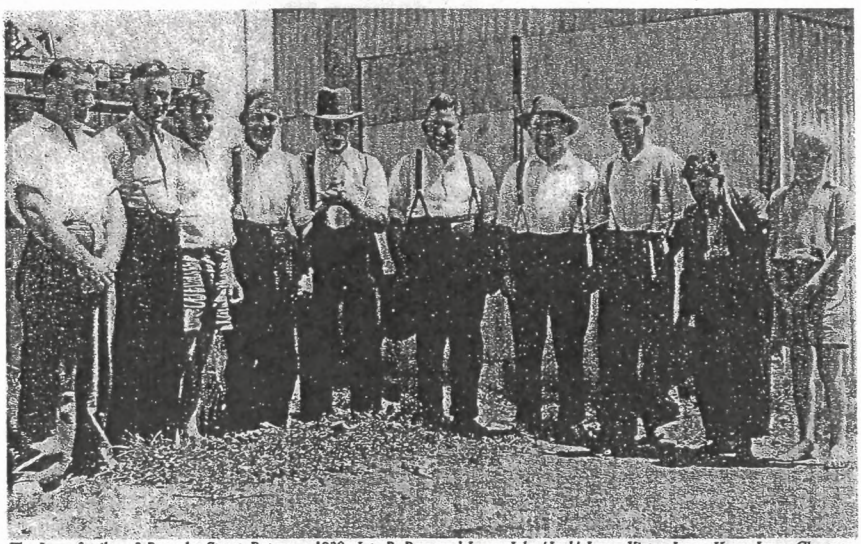
Botany fishermen and their boats - moored near the mouth of the Cooks River, 1938. L to R: Mr William 'Trappie' Duncan (84), Jim 'Snider' Thompson (82), Harry Jones (71) and James Smith (79). These men were descendents of the first families of Fishing Town. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

James and Charles Smith Jnr carried on the family fishing tradition but times were changing. The fishermen of Botany were affected by the winter closure of the Georges River. To continue making a living Charles and other fishermen would leave their families and head north to Tuggerah Lake and Lake Macquarie in May, after the Mullet season was over, and stay for about five months.

His brother-in-law, Frederick Wood, decided to seek other employment for the winter when their main fishing spot was closed. He knew of eight Botany fisherman who had left for Lake Macquarie and 16 altogether who had left the Bay. When there was talk of closing the whole of Botany Bay over winter the fishermen protested that this would throw a good many poor people out of a living at Botany and affect the supply of fresh fish to Sydney.

In the end, only the rivers were closed. It was thought that extra supplies could be brought from places further away, when the transported fish would keep better in the winter climate. In any case the families of Fishing Town survived these hard times and the next generation started working in the early twentieth century.

"Fishing Town today comprises about 200 inhabitants, descendants of pioneers who were the first men to fish systematically what is probably one of the most treacherous bays on the Australian coast. There are the Smiths, Duncans, Jones, Thompsons, Bagnalls and the Johnsons, whose fathers and grandfathers arrived in Sydney a hundred or more years ago. Descendants of English, Scottish and Welsh fisherfolk, they carried on the traditions of their forbears in a new colony, and in all weathers pursued their calling: prawning and fishing." (Sydney Morning Herald, Monday 10 January, 1938, p8e.)



The Jones family at 3 Booralee Street, Botany, c.1938. L to R: Raymond Jones, John 'Jack' Jones, Victor Jones, Harry Jones, Clarence Jones, Stephen 'Bunda' Jones, Arthur 'Luke' Jones, Stephen Jones and Jack Jones. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

Life in Fishing Town

A group of spectators on the beach at Botany watching one of the sailing boat races, c.1915. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

The fishermen of Botany introduced sailing competitions on Botany Bay. From about 1903 a fish-selling agent donated prizes for the races. The prizes would be cases of fruit, soft drinks or kegs of beer. They became annual festive events on the Bay, celebrated by the fishing families.

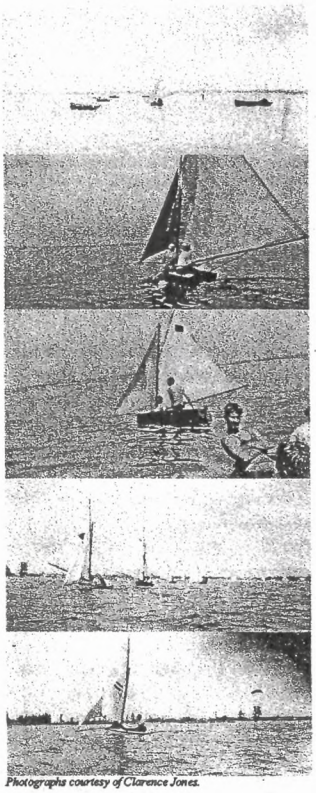
During the Depression a young Leonard Smith and his close friend Ray Jones made a canoe out of a 44 gallon drum. Stan Vincent saw this and fashioned several bigger sailing boats with help from Jack Johnson and Ted Duncan. Tin Dinghy races started on the Bay.

The Port Botany Tin Dinghy Sailing Club was formed and the families of Fishing Town turned out in force on weekends to watch these races, usually every Sunday. Sometimes there would be about twenty boats racing.

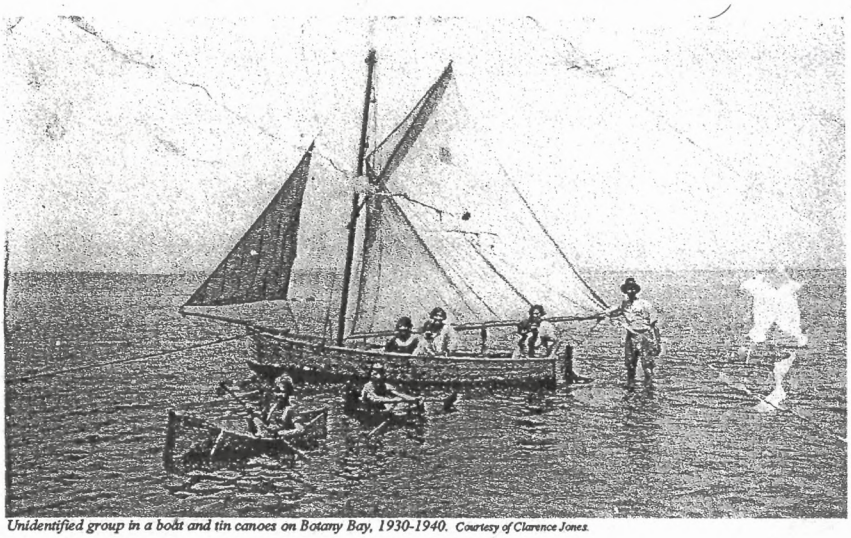
Upwards of 200 people would watch from the beach. The gathering would tell yarns, sing, drink beer and play various games on the beach like quoits.

Each boat had two crew. The boats had to be made of metal although the stem, keel and decking could be wood. They were just over seven feet long, the mast being about fifteen. For their size, they carried more sail than any other boat.

They were sailed on a triangular course of six miles. The boats could easily capsize and the only thing for it was to wait until you could be bailed out. The crew would sit in the sail as a precaution from sharks.



Photographs courtesy of Clarence Jones.



Unidentified group in a boat and tin canoes on Botany Bay, 1930-1940. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

Dancing the 'Tickletoe' at the old Tin Dinghy clubhouse, 1950s. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

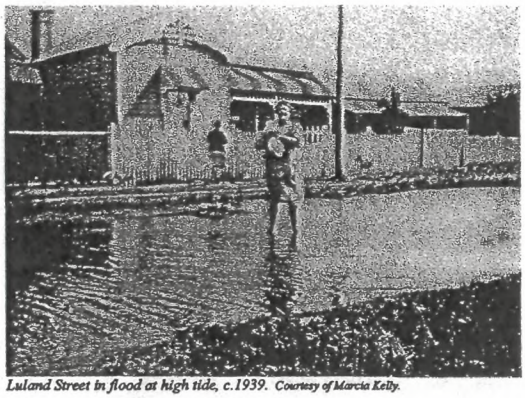
A corrugated iron shed was built on the beach front of Fishing Town. This was the Tin Dinghy clubhouse and on most Saturday nights the shed was used for social dances.

The club members called themselves the Merry Makers and from the late 1930s would hold an annual picnic for all the families.

The waterline of Botany Bay used to lap the bottom of Booralee Street and during high tides the street would flood to depths of about two feet. At times the families would sail their boats up Booralee Street and then carry out repairs in their front yards.

The club eventually became the Port Botany Motor Boat Club but the fun continued until constant problems with flooding led to its closure in the late 1950s.

Descendents of Charles Smith, Botany (boats in background), 1950s-1960s. Courtesy of Jim White.



Luland Street in flood at high tide, c.1939. Courtesy of Marcia Kelly.

Sharkride! Wayne Jones and Maureen Smith at Botany Bay, c.1962. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

L-R: Les Jones, Wayne Jones (child) and 'Bunda' Jones in the yard at Luland Street, 1940s-1960s. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

If you can recognise any of these faces, let us know. Courtesy of Clarence Jones.

A Family Legacy

The Smith family, like other fishing families, had acquired a substantial amount of land in Booralee and Luland Street in Botany and houses were built here for the next generation. They also built two large boatsheds on the foreshores of the Bay.

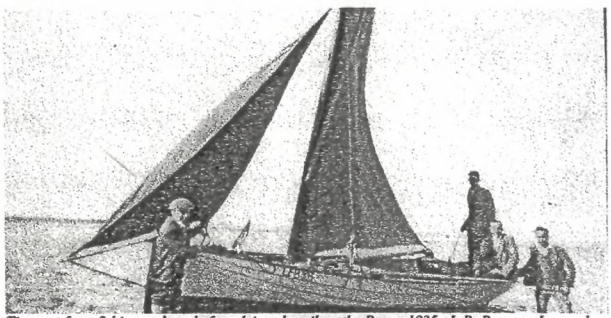
Cuthbert Smith and his wife Kathleen (nee Daines) with their sons and daughters, c.1950. L-R: seated are Kathleen, Cuthbert and Leonard. Back row - Bertie, Alma, Henry, Kath and Percy. Courtesy of Marjory Smith.

James Smith never married but the sons of Charles Smith Jnr, Cuthbert, Harold and Claude, followed their father into fishing and all lived in Fishing Town. Only Cuthbert remained a full-time professional fisherman.

Cuthbert (b. 1883) went into the boats with his father at a very young age in the 1890s. His father had used hand-made nets but he used machine-made nets imported from Ireland. Every fisherman had to repair any damage from sharks or snags and would always carry a handy little netting needle for repairs on board. These nets also had to be tanned every season which stopped them from rotting.

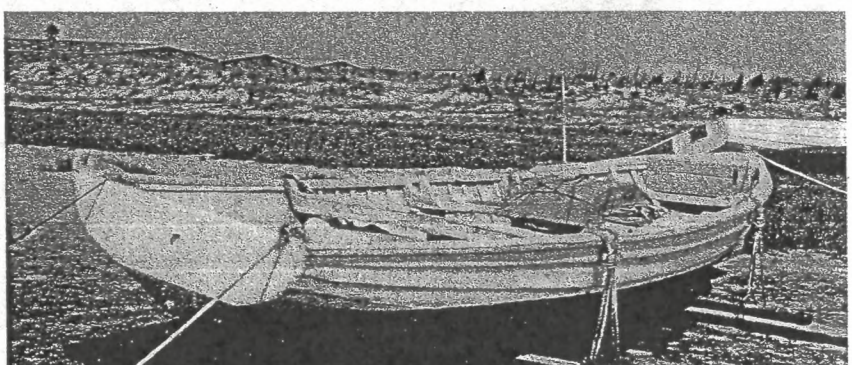
Hundreds of metres of rope and net would be piled in the back of the boat ready to be fed out over a wooden roller when shooting a haul.

They would carry a couple of cane baskets on board for scooping the fish from the net to the boat. They could load about 30 baskets of fish in the boat - each basket holding about 80 pounds of fish.



Time out from fishing and ready for a leisurely sail on the Bay, c.1935. L-R: Percy or Leonard Smith, Bertie 'Duker' Smith and two other friends on their fishing boat, the 'Pastime'. The LFB on the side of the boat stands for Licenced Fishing Boat - a regulation brought in under the 1881 Fisheries Act. Courtesy of Marjory Smith.

Cuthbert married Kathleen Daines and they had seven children. Leonard (b.1913), Percy (b.1914), Alma (b.1917), Bertie (b.1919). Kath (b.1921) and Henry (b.1923) were the fourth generation descended from Charles Smith Snr. Bertie and Henry worked on the boats in their early years but moved into other employment, although they still lent a hand, especially on the weekends.



The Smiths' fishing boat, the 'Pastime', moored on the mudflats near the Engine Pond, 1983. The standard fishing boat was 20 feet long and 7 feet wide with a mast of about 10-12 feet with a light canvas sail. The 'Pastime' was Cuthbert Smith's boat, built in about 1913, and was passed down to his sons Leonard and Percy Smith, the last professional fishermen of Fishing Town. Courtesy of Helen Smith.

The End of an Era

Leonard and Percy remained professional fisherman. They were the last professional fishermen of Fishing Town to work in Botany Bay, working until the late 1970s. They still hauled the nets in by hand, as their ancestors had done before them.

Leonard and Percy Smith folding their nets at Botany Bay. c.1968. They now used nylon nets with plastic corks. Courtesy of John Smith.

In 1977 they were filmed for Bill Peach's television series about Australia. He described the way they hauled their nets as being 'like a scene from the Bible'.

Their boats were moored on the shallow flats near the end of Booralee and Bay streets. At low tide the men could walk out to their boats and then pole out to the deep. They fished all year round and the only thing that stopped them was a storm or a strong southerly wind. Such times would be used for repairing nets.

Leonard and Percy had a single piston inboard motor on the boat but before that, they used to sail and when they couldn't fill a sail, they rowed it.

They would slide off into the blue black nights, speckled with distant light and a dark colourless abyss in front of them for the next five miles of Botany Bay. Sometimes the sun would be close to rising as they made the return crossing and sometimes it was pitch black all the way.

It's hard to imagine how they could have rowed back without wind. They stood in their 20 foot boats and drew on 16 feet oars; and the catches! The boat would have been on the gunnels. They took enormous quantities of fish out of the Bay.

Leonard and Percy Smith in the 'Pastime' at Botany Bay, c.1968. Courtesy of John Smith.

Leonard Smith in the shallows of Botany Bay, c.1968. Courtesy of John Smith.

They were never very relaxed about the weather. Leonard could pick the winds at a slight shift and Percy would watch the barometer for days, for the bigger picture.

They lived through the dramatic changes that took place on the Bay and the impacts it had on Fishing Town. In later years, Leonard and Percy had a farcical time trying to take a haul of fish off the side of the runway. They thought it was worth a try, but never tried it again.

Though men of few words, they were proud of what they did. They worked hard and honestly.

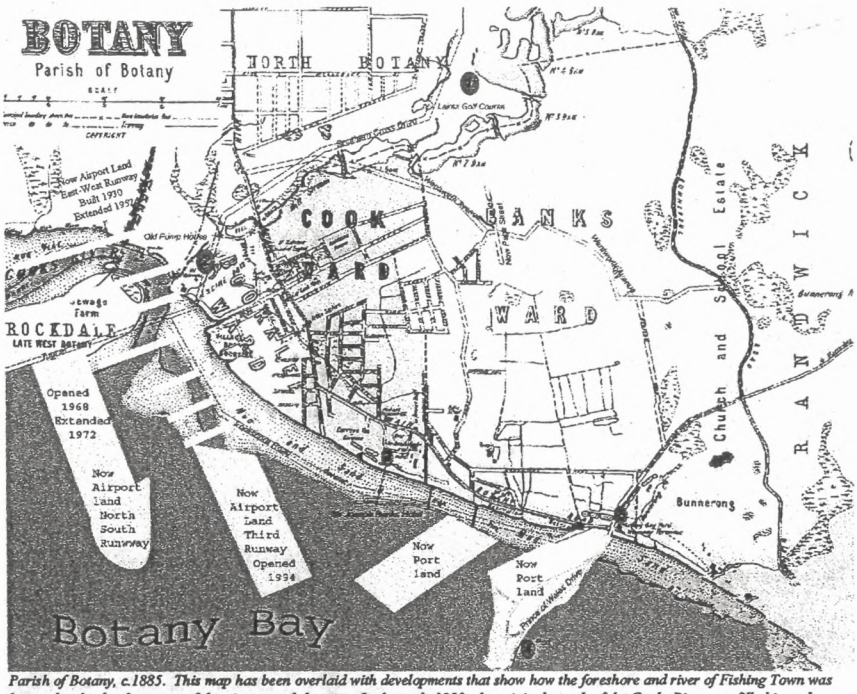
And they lived the life of Fishing Town, with its Tin Dinghy Club races, its weekend Two-Up games, its social dances at the Tin Dinghy Club hall and the whole lifeblood that went with being part of a close-knit community.

When they retired Percy and Leonard moved south to Jervis Bay. The community of Fishing Town has now gone but the memories live on.

Percy and Bertie Smith passed away only recently. Alma Smith still lives close by in Coogee. Leonard, Henry and Kath Smith are enjoying their retirements on the south coast and this year Leonard Smith celebrated his 90th birthday.

Leonard and Henry Smith in Jervis Bay, c.1985. Courtesy of John Smith.

The Loss of Fishing Town



Parish of Botany, c.1885. This map has been overlaid with developments that show how the foreshore and river of Fishing Town was lost under the developments of the airport and the port. In the early 1950s the original mouth of the Cooks River was filled in and diverted 1.6km west to make way for the extension of the airport runway. The construction of the second and third runways meant the loss of the mudflats, the beach and the natural harbour. Original map courtesy of City of Sydney Archives.

It was in the twentieth century that Fishing Town completely lost its close proximity to the waters of Botany Bay. It happened in stages but each stage was bigger than the last.

As early as 1891 the foreshores at Botany were under threat from erosion but Government indecision led to delays until 1936 when a sea wall was finally commenced. It involved reclamation work from the Pier to Cooks River and was started as a Work Relief Scheme at the end of the Depression.

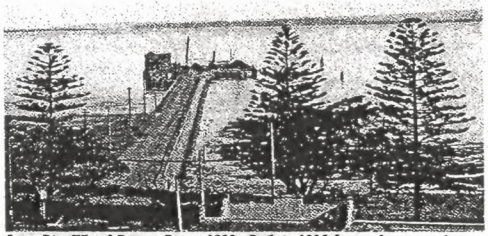
"In the last 10 or 15 years the folk of Fishing Town, after a comparatively prosperous period of 100 years, have suffered some reverses. The breakwater, they say, has interfered with the favourite routes that were taken by the great shoals of mullet." (Sydney Morning Herald, Monday 10 January, 1938, p.12.)

The breakwater was built at the mouth of the Cooks River to control the flow of the channel. Fishing Town was then dramatically affected by the construction of the sewer system. Two above ground sewer systems were built in the 1920s and 1930s. They ran down Hale Street and along the foreshore of Botany Bay to service the Southern and Western Suburbs Outfall Sewer scheme.

The fishermen now had to climb steps over these sewers to get to their boat harbour and the foreshore. They were slowly being disconnected from the sea. Around this time Fishing Town was also rezoned as an industrial area. Many of the homes were demolished to make way for new industrial complexes.

The proclamation of Botany Bay as a port of entry for overseas shipping in 1930 signalled the construction of oil tanker berths at Kurnell and the beginnings of the Port Botany development. Further dredging for Port Botany in the early 1970s included the construction of Foreshore Road which cut off Fishing Town from the Bay once and for all. The original beachside of the Botany suburb disappeared.

The enlargement of Sydney Airport also had a major impact. The Federal government had purchased land at Mascot for the Airport in 1921. In the early 1950s the original mouth of the Cooks River was filled in and diverted westward for the first runway extensions. This was followed by two other major reclamation projects for the second and third runways from the 1960s to 1990s.



Long Pier Wharf, Botany Bay, c.1938. Built in 1885 for wool cargoes, it was then used for coal loads from 1923 and later demolished during the development of Port Botany. City of Botany Bay Library Service.

Dredging of such magnitude caused long-term alterations to wave action and tidal currents, in turn changing the sedimentation patterns. Such massive dredging and hundreds of hectares of reclamation work meant the loss of important seagrass beds which were the natural nurseries for fish.

All these developments made the fishing industry less viable in Botany Bay. The last fishermen of Fishing Town moved on in the 1970s and their patch was left to recreational fishers. The end of the fishing industry was signalled when commercial fishing was banned in all of Botany Bay from May 2002. In memory of that industry, The George Hanna Memorial Museum wishes to thank all those who provided information for this exhibition and helped to recreate the lost Fishing Town of Botany.