

THE EARLY DAYS OF PARK BEACH SURF LIFE SAVING CLUB

Reminiscences by Peter Biscoe, February 2015

Park Beach Surf Life Saving Club was formed in 1959. I joined in 1960. I was the Club's second captain from 1961 to 1963 and remained a member until early 1968 when I left Tasmania. I have been asked by Gil Oakes to wind my mind back to my time as a member. As that was half a century ago and few Club records have survived, there are gaps and imperfections in my recollection, for which I hope I will be forgiven.

At the outset, I would like to acknowledge the sterling job that my contemporaries and friends Brian Dunkin and Gil Oakes have been doing for some years in creating and maintaining a Club website, recording the history of the Club, and preserving or reviving friendships forged between former members so long ago.

For those who wish to know more about me, this is my life in a nutshell. I attended St Virgil's College in Hobart, represented Tasmania in surf life saving and water polo, won some State swimming titles, and enjoyed rugby until injury put a stop to it (that knee now troubles me!). After graduating in law and working as a lawyer for a year in Hobart, I left Tasmania in early 1968 aged 24. The next six years were spent in London and the USA studying, working and writing a legal book. Thereafter I practised as a barrister in Sydney, married and had four children, was appointed a Queens Counsel, remarried, wrote another legal book, and was appointed a Judge in 2006.

After returning from overseas in 1974, I visited my parents in Hobart, and upon taking a nostalgic drive to Park Beach was shocked to find that the clubhouse was gone! I feared the worst: that the Club had folded. Later, I received the more cheerful news that the Club had recently amalgamated with our old rival Hobart Carlton SLSC at the other end of the beach, to become Carlton Park SLSC. I feel a tinge of sadness that the Club did not endure as a separate entity, but understand that amalgamation was a rational decision at the time.

My first contact with the Club was in the winter of 1960 when I was a final year student at St Virgil's. It came about when Cliff invited me to meet Rex over dinner at Rex's home. Rex was then about 30. He was a pleasant, personable, modest fellow who looked like he had been a footballer.

Cliff, among other things, was a good rugby player (for the Gordon club) and coach and an accomplished trad jazz musician who motivated several of us in the rugby teams to play instruments together and with him at jazz happenings. He lent me an old trombone that I played excruciatingly badly. In 1971 he became the Club president. It was good to see Cliff again at the Club's 50th reunion in 2010, entertaining us with music and song. Just like old times.

The point of my meeting with Rex was to encourage me to join the Club and, through me, to encourage other boys to do so. Rex's abalone dinner was memorable because I had not eaten abalone before: in those days it was nearly all exported to Japan or the USA (a few years later I spent a Uni vacation diving commercially, but with little profit, for abalone).

That evening Rex and Cliff did spark my interest in joining the fledgling Park Beach SLSC.

In the summer of 1960, which marked the end of our school days, Brian Dunkin and I camped for a couple of weeks beside a large rock behind the sand dunes at Park Beach (in a tent borrowed from 1st Lindisfarne Scouts of which we were members). At that time the beach, sand dunes and southern cliff were still in pristine condition. The following year an area behind the sand dunes was cleared for a clubhouse and vehicle access; today there is a public toilet block there and the southern cliff has a number of houses. In the 1960s Dodges Ferry and Lewisham were small villages; today they are quite suburban. Our camping holiday was a carefree surfing interlude. Every day the surf was up and the sun was hot; we became as brown as berries. Sometimes friendly local shack owners fed us. We struck up a friendship with Alison Germaine and another girl (whose name I cannot recall) whose families had shacks nearby; and thereafter they regularly barracked for the Club at surf carnivals.

Dunk went on to win the State junior belt and to represent the State in surf life saving, amateur football and water polo and in 1970 to win the Club's best all round competitor award. His initial career was in the Army making maps in remote parts of Australia and on active service in Borneo. Later, he worked in the Arabian and south-east Asian oilfields. Dunk now lives in Canada where he works as a technical writer gathering complex business and technical information and putting it into plain language. He returns regularly to Tassie.

His literary flair is apparent in an historical novel that he has written based in Tasmania. In my opinion, it is worthy of publication.

The Club's first president and one of its founders was Marc Ashton, who had a shack at Park Beach (it is still there). He remained president until January 1972 when he suffered a vote of no confidence and resigned. Whatever the politics were that brought about this unhappy event, he deserves to be honoured for his presidency for most of the Club's life.

In the Club's first season, 1959-60, it had seven active members who gained the Bronze Medallion. They included Rex Wright, who was the Club's first captain and one of its founders, and his brother Cliff, who was my school rugby coach.

In 1960-61 - the Club's second season – I was one of nine boys, all from St Virgil's College except Brian Dunkin and Graeme Williams - who became the Club's second Bronze Medallion squad. The others were Brian ("Daffles") Foley (a future club captain and a good middle distance runner), Matt Foster (a good swimmer), Paul ("Pills") Turnbull (a good rugby player), John Bingley (another good rugby player), Barry Whelan and Peter Cusick.

In the Club's third season, 1961-62, ten more joined the Club and gained Bronze Medallions. They were Gil Oakes (a future Club secretary and captain, and a State champion beach sprinter), Ian ("Mo") Mulholland (a champion swimmer who later joined the Army and now lives in WA), Tony ("Birdie") Priest (with whom Dunk and I had been in 1st Lindisfarne Scouts), Geoff Morley (a good belt swimmer with an eccentric talent of walking along the beach on his hands), Chris Cruise (strong on the board and ski and a fine musician), Chris Guesdon (who became a champion marathon swimmer and administrator, and Club president in 1972/73, 73/74, and 74/75 seasons,) Gary Gilmour (older than most of us,) John Skinner, Phillip Capon, and Edward Pool.

In the Club's fourth season, 1962-63, the membership exploded with 21 new members gaining their Bronze Medallions. They included two State champion swimmers, David Challis and Barry Smith, as well as Bill Griffiths (a law student with whom I had some diving adventures) and Dennis Cole (strong in the boat).

Despite my tender years, in 1961 I was thrust into the role of Club captain, succeeding Rex Wright, largely because the active members were nearly all of

a similar age. Looking back, I have to say that I was immature for the role. I had the mistaken notion that a surf lifesaving club should be run along military lines. That might have been so after World War II when membership around Australia largely comprised ex-servicemen, which may explain the existence of the march past competition at surf carnivals. But in the 1960s, the times they were a changin'. The 1960s were the start and zenith of anti-establishment hedonism fuelled by a sexual revolution (thanks to the discovery of the Pill) and growing opposition to the Vietnam war among many of the young. Despite the fact that the voting age and the drinking age then were 21, when men turned 20 we went into a birthday ballot to see who would be conscripted and likely sent off to fight in Vietnam. I do not recall anyone from Park Beach SLSC being conscripted, although a friend from another club was conscripted and suffered a gunshot wound. In the surf the freedom of just being a board rider was starting to lure young men away from surf life saving clubs. This probably contributed to the later entry of women into the surf life saving movement.

Brian ("Daffles") Foley, who succeeded me as Club captain, was in my class at St Virgils where he represented the school at middle distance running, swimming and hockey. He was a gentle soul, a smile always on his lips. He took a Science degree at Uni. In later years he had a lead role in the administration of Masters running internationally. The last time I saw him was at the Club's 40th anniversary reunion in 2000. He had matured into a strong minded man. Along with many others, I was saddened by his sudden and untimely death a few years later.

Gil Oakes was Club secretary from 1963 to 1966, Club captain from 1966 to 1969 and State beach sprint champion from 1964 to 1966: he represented the State in that event in 1966 at Coolangatta. He was a tower of strength in Club administration in the early years. He took an Arts degree and had a lengthy career in the Tasmanian Public Service.

It was in or about 1962 that we had the good fortune to be joined by two experienced, older surf life savers from interstate: Eoin McDonald from Queensland and Geoff Moffatt from NSW. Geoff was the Club secretary in 1962-63 and a member of the R & R team. He now lives in South Australia where he has been heavily involved in surf life saving for many years. Eoin

soon became the Club's boat captain and sweep. He was witty and popular and showed us that surf lifesaving did not have to consist only of patrols and iron discipline. He injected a real element of fun into Club life. Until his arrival, swimming was the Club's main focus at surf carnivals, in which we achieved some success. He showed us that there were other facets of a surf club that members with various talents could enjoy. Eoin became Club captain in 1969-71. It was good to see him at the Club's 50th anniversary reunion in 2010. I am sorry that he is no longer with us.

In the first couple of years, because the Club membership was so small, we had to do patrols every couple of weeks. Patrols could be rather dour affairs on cold Tassie days. At that time surfing in Tasmania had not become as popular among the general public as it is now and in bleak weather the beach was generally not well frequented.

As Club captain, I was usually at the beach every weekend from Spring to Autumn on either or both Saturday and Sunday. On Friday nights in the warmer months I played water polo. I was then living with my parents at Lindisfarne and later Sandy Bay as a Uni student. Each weekend morning, I would ride to the beach and each evening ride home again on my two-seater motor scooter (a Jawa Cezeta, the largest motor scooter in the world and, I am happy to say, popular with the girls). A couple of years later, I purchased my mother's Austin A30 from my earnings as a labourer at the Cascade brewery during Uni vacations, and this made trips to and from Park Beach more comfortable.

The arrival of our first clubhouse in about 1962 made things more comfortable for members. It looked like an old army barracks hut and was nicely located behind the sand dunes in a sheltered area that was levelled to accommodate it. The clubhouse may have been obtained from the newly constructed Hobart Airport and reassembled. Members under the supervision of architect Esmond-Dorney (who owned the modernistic shack that still stands above where the clubhouse was), president Marc Ashton and a builder Dave Wright, mixed concrete and filled kerosene cans to form the piers. Marc Ashton had the keys to the clubhouse. Initially, Marc declined my request for a key, as I thought was my right as the new captain. Presumably he thought that I was too young to be entrusted with a key. I was taken aback and privately

contemplated resigning as captain, but didn't. Eventually, he loosened up and gave keys to me and other office bearers. Later, Eoin McDonald and others often overnighted in the clubhouse.

We competed at all the surf life saving carnivals around Tasmania with a good measure of success. We looked forward to them. We sometimes slept in bunks at other clubhouses the night before a carnival on the north-west coast. I still have a phobia about sleeping in the top deck of a bunk due to the fact that I fell out of one while sleeping at the Burnie SLSC clubhouse the night before a surf carnival. I sprained an ankle rather badly, which made running in and out of the water in events next day rather painful.

In the early years Carlton and then Park Beach were the only surf life saving clubs in southern Tasmania. The Clifton club had not yet been formed. Most of the inter-club carnivals were on the north-west coast. Many of us had difficulty in travelling to them because we were young and did not have our own wheels. For the first couple of years I was usually dependent upon my parents driving me to and from the other end of Tasmania.

The R&R event was then regarded as the blue ribbon event at surf carnivals. I have several small black and white photos taken by my father around 1963 at (I think) Penguin Beach of the Park Beach R&R team competing and also of me competing in the belt race. The day looks bleak. One of the photos is of particular interest (and should be on the Club website) because it is a close-up of the R&R team in drill formation just before drawing the marbles and the members are easily identifiable: (L to R) Geoff Moffatt, Brian Foley, Eoin McDonald, David Challis, Peter Biscoe and Geoff Morley. I still have the medal the Club awarded me as the best R & R man in 1963-64.

We trained solidly at the R&R. However, we never won the event at carnivals and harboured an unfounded suspicion that the judges, who all came from the older clubs, thought we should serve our time before they would acknowledge our ability. A supremely anti-climactic moment came at the State championships in about 1963. We had an excellent draw, well suited to our individual abilities and maximising our chances of winning. David Challis drew No 1 as the swimmer. I drew No 2 as the beltman. To the best of my imperfect recollection, the rest of the draw was as follows. Eoin McDonald drew No 3 as first linesman. Brian Foley drew No 4 as second linesman. Geoff

Moffatt drew No 5 as third linesman. Geoff Morley drew No 6 on the reel. We were first out to the buoys on the swim and belt legs. So it all came down to whether our drill was good enough. Afterwards, the announcement came over the loud speaker that we had won. We were jubilant. Perhaps two minutes later there was an announcement that an error had been made in counting the points, and that in fact another club had won. We were crestfallen. It was the only occasion that such an incident occurred in my years in any sport.

I have a large photograph of the 1961 state team about to board an Ansett plane at Hobart Airport en route to the Australian championships at Moana Beach, South Australia. They were (as I wrote on the back in 1961): *Back row*: Noel Davies, Hobart Carlton (State observer); Peter Dixon, Penguin, (beach sprint); Dale Volprecht, Burnie (senior surf); Tony Ralph, Low Head (senior surf); Peter Biscoe, Park Beach (junior surf); Ian Crawford, Burnie (junior belt); John Dunkley, Low Head (junior surf); ?? (orange boy??); Maurice Hardy, Burnie (board and ski) *Front row*: Robert Smith, Hobart Carlton (senior belt); “Binnie” Wilson, Ulverstone (coach and manager); “Brushback” Hill, Devonport (captain); Dennis Robertson, Hobart Carlton (senior surf). It would be worth putting this photo on the Club website.

An anecdote about respect for the power of the surf. I represented Tasmania at three Australian surf lifesaving championships: in Adelaide (Moana Beach) Perth (Cottelsloe Beach) and Sydney (Dee Why Beach). At the Sydney championships the Tasmanian team was staying at a hotel at Manly beach. Many club teams from around Australia were competing next day in the Australian inter-club championship, which were held the day before the Australian interstate championship. State reps competed for their clubs on the first day and their States on the second day. Before breakfast the day before the inter-club championship, I walked with some of the Tassie State team along Manly beach for a swim. We spoke briefly to a group from the Hobart Carlton club halfway down the beach, who were competing next day. One was John Anderson. He was aged about 16 or 17, a champion pool swimmer and a good bloke. I think his parents had a holiday shack in the Park Beach area. We continued our walk to the southern end of Manly beach. It was the biggest surf I had seen: too big for most on the beach. The only way you could get out was via a fast rip next to the rocks. When you caught one of the huge waves, which I did several times, it did not dump but sucked you under for 10 seconds

or more (too long) while propelling you forward with tremendous power towards the beach. It was a big adrenalin rush but, looking back, it was foolhardy to have been out there. Afterwards we walked back along Manly beach en route to our hotel. We encountered some of the Hobart Carlton boys on the beach. Johnny Anderson had disappeared. His towel and t-shirt were still on the beach. His body was washed up a week later. The tragedy cast a shadow over the Australian championships. That day I learned a grim lesson in respecting the power of the surf.

The Club colours were flamingo, black and white. I was at a Club meeting in about 1962 when it was decided to adopt those colours. Unexpectedly, it caused resentment among a few members of Hobart Carlton SLSC because our flamingo was said to be too similar to the red in their club colours. In those days Carlton SLSC ran a successful disco in Hobart on Friday nights, which I often frequented. Often on the door was Robert Smith who may have been Hobart Carlton's secretary at the time; he was also a State representative in the senior belt. One night at the door he gave me the cold shoulder over our new colours. We sorted it out not by changing our colours but by using white as our dominant colour, thus distinguishing Hobart Carlton's dominant red colour.

The Club's emblem was a flamingo seahorse with a surf reel and line for its eye and spine. It is believed that the designer was Ian Duguid. I was at the same Club meeting in about 1962 when it was tabled and adopted. I thought then, and still think, that it is a terrific design.

The Club's first surf boat, acquired in about 1961 probably from Stanley SLSC, was called "Captain Bradley". She was an old clinker-built hulk, which surely was left over from the whaling days. She was a big, lumbering thing and we never raced her. Dunk, keen but with no experience, swept her on her maiden voyage at Park Beach, after putting her in the water for half an hour to expand the wood so she wouldn't leak. She was so heavy that one Saturday the boys gave up on dragging her back to the clubhouse after taking her out. Having better things to do, they left her on the beach overnight. Next morning she was sunk to her gunwales in the sand. Dunk confesses that they were too lazy to help dig her out, much to the ire of Eoin McDonald. She eventually became fuel for a bonfire. Later a moulded ply boat was acquired, perhaps from

Devonport SLSC. We renamed her “Marc Ashton” after the Club president. Although she had seen better days, at least we could race her. In the early years we only had one competition boat crew that trained as such, so that if one of them became unavailable any of us could be called on to fill the vacancy.

The Club had a Ladies Auxiliary for one season. One of the few surviving Club records that I have seen is the first and last annual report of the Ladies Auxiliary for 1962-1963. It was composed and signed by my mother as President. It is an intriguing historical document. It records that their first meeting was attended by “a large number of enthusiastic schoolgirls who were unable to attend subsequent meetings because of school work”. It records that they raised money for the Club by the raffle of a hamper and in other ways, made and donated two resuscitation pillows and a pennant, repaired training costumes and paid for badges to be sewn on them, and donated a new surf line “which was urgently required”. It notes that they entertained Club members and their partners at four parties. All went well at three of the parties at my home and the homes of Mrs Williams and Mrs Poole. The fourth party, held by Misses Sue Dare and Mandy Cruickshank, seems to have been a disaster for it was recorded that it “was gate crashed by a large number of outsiders and insufficient supper was brought”. It is unclear if the supper was insufficient because there was not enough to feed the gatecrashers. I must have been there but have no recollection of gatecrashers or of hungering for more supper! Unhappily, the report concludes by recording the decision that “as we were getting little support from the members of the Club or their mothers, the Ladies Auxilliary could no longer function usefully. However, as individuals, we would be willing to give help as required”.

The surviving members of Park Beach SLSC in its early years have grown old. However, through the prism of the years, we appreciate that it was due to our membership that we acquired a lifelong love of the surf, enduring friendships and fond memories of our youthful comrades on the beach.

Peter Biscoe

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