

Changing Visions of Baths and Bathers: DESEGREGATING OCEAN BATHS IN WOLLONGONG, KIAMA AND GERRINGONG

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Introduction

Compared to other Australian states and territories, one of the most distinctive features of the coast of New South Wales (NSW) is that it hosts around a hundred ocean baths. Whether minimalist or highly formalised, these are public seawater pools where the ocean waves wash over the sides. They not only offer protection from dangerous surf or rip currents of the surf beach but also provide more challenging swimming environments than the still waters of a filtered, chlorinated inground or indoor pool.¹ Before shark meshing was introduced along the most populated stretch of the NSW coast, the ocean baths were also a highly valued protection against sharks.

Often prized as community icons, ocean baths continue to attract regular and occasional day and night patrons.² They host swimming clubs, winter swimming clubs, school swimming sessions and learn-to-swim programs. Few ocean baths are supervised and even fewer charge admission, but only McIvers Baths in the Sydney suburb of Coogee is now reserved solely for use by women and children.

Kurt Iveson used the 1990s dispute about access to McIvers Baths and their subsequent exemption from anti-discrimination legislation to investigate the ways some forms of exclusion can facilitate 'publicness'.³ He suggested that spaces of withdrawal encourage specific forms of sociability and co-presence that benefit disadvantaged publics and facilitate mixing across such barriers as age, sexuality, social status, ethnicity, and religious affiliations. Iveson did not extend his analysis to other NSW communities (Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong) which once proudly promoted their separate ocean baths for men and women, nor did he explore the ways in which baths, beaches and other public places formally open-to-all still function as a mosaic of spaces catering to different publics.

Iveson is not alone in overlooking the range and social complexities of

ocean baths. Histories focused on the shared characteristics of Australia's surf beaches likewise neglect the ongoing relationship between the cultures of the beach and the ocean baths in NSW, including the involvement of surf lifesavers in the development, operation and use of the ocean baths.⁴ In the decades when the mainstream surf lifesaving and surfing cultures excluded women, women's swimming clubs based at gender-segregated or open-to-all ocean baths complemented the men-only surf clubs based at the surf beaches.⁵ All of those gendered leisure spaces had significance for the health, wellbeing, identity and friendships of the publics that used them.⁶

Ocean baths were also significant in the development of tourism. To any nineteenth-century coastal community aspiring to become 'the Brighton of New South Wales', ocean baths were the most economical means of providing a safe, 'respectable' venue for seabathing that gave effective protection from sharks and the undertow to people with few swimming skills.⁷ For recreational bathers, the gender-segregated NSW ocean baths were the local equivalent of the gender-segregated bathing machines that provided 'respectable' seabathing at the famous resorts on Britain's cooler, calmer, shark-free coasts.⁸

To the Victorian era's middle classes, mixed nude seabathing at a resort's main beach seemed a reversion to indecent savage practices or the decadence of classical Rome rather than anything appropriate to a respectable modern watering place.⁹ As swimming costumes became commonplace, mixed bathing gained in respectability. By the 1890s, English tourists found that mixed or 'continental' bathing in the sea by men and women wearing neck-to-knee costumes had become a standard practice at French seaside resorts.¹⁰

In Britain, men's and women's competitive watersports developed largely within the gender-segregated indoor municipal baths created to promote hygiene among the poorer classes and in the baths associated with polytechnical institutes.¹¹ In Australia, where gender-segregated tidal swimming pools provided the main competition and learn-to-swim venues into the 1920s, several NSW communities developed multiple ocean baths to satisfy the demands of their residents and visitors.¹² Nancy Gushing highlighted Newcastle's early twentieth-century demand for modern ocean baths to supersede its unsatisfactory indoor seawater Corporation Baths and complement its surf beaches and its nineteenth-century ocean baths offering separate bathing hours for men and women.¹³

Maintaining separate ocean baths for men and women was feasible only in coastal communities where suitable sites existed for two bathing areas and where men's and women's demand for segregated seabathing made shared use of a common baths unsatisfactory. Studying the desegregation of ocean baths in Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong reveals the changing visions

for their ocean baths and the conflict between metropolitan and regional views of gender-segregation at the ocean beaches and the ocean baths.

The Illawarra Ports With Men's and Women's Baths

As nineteenth-century Sydney became more crowded and polluted, Sydney residents sought holidays in towns with a suitable climate, fresh air, an interesting landscape and safe 'respectable' means of seabathing. Seabathing was considered a healthy, pleasurable, sometimes thrilling experience, as well as a way to get clean and cool and obtain relief from the humid summer.

Coastal steamers brought Sydney tourists south to the improved harbours at Wollongong and Kiama, when roads were poor and rail links to Sydney non-existent. By the late nineteenth-century, Wollongong was the major port for the Illawarra coalmines, further south the minor port of Kiama shipped blue metal from its quarries as well as the surrounding district's dairy products, while Gerringong was a minor dairy port a little further to the south. Steamship guides and railway guides testify to the significance of the ocean baths in these communities for tourism, along with attractions such as the Kiama Blowhole — where the sea surges through the rocks, sometimes spouting as high as a lighthouse.¹⁴ Tourism became more significant in Gerringong after the 1890s when the arrival of the South Coast Railway resulted in the loss of the town's shipping trade. Road travel was of only minor importance in the Illawarra until the 1920s.

By 1842, convict labour had upgraded Wollongong's first ladies baths, so it offered the luxury of a bath 'for health or pleasure' with 'delicacy, comfort and safety to the most fastidious and timid' contrasting with the 'wild and angry lashings of the foaming tide without'.¹⁵ Later known as the Chain Baths or the Nuns Pool, these secluded baths once provided ropes, chains and rings for women and children who 'wished to swim or play the whale', while men bathed in less luxurious swimming holes on the wide rock platform nearer the town.

While it was asserted that 'men with the least sense of decency will not venture on the sacred precinct of the females' bathing ground', the 'unmanly and despicable conduct' of men 'prying and prowling' around the ladies bathing places did frighten, annoy and insult female bathers.¹⁶ Efforts were made to fence the nearby cliffs 'to prevent persons looking down into the bathing place' or at least remove the female bathers' need to post a lookout to preserve their privacy.¹⁷ The extent of privacy required for women's bathing was debatable. In the 1890s, the men of Kiama's Progress Association provided a cloth screen to further enhance the privacy of bathers at the Ladies Baths at Pheasant Point.¹⁸ Evidently considering their baths were already sufficiently private, the Kiama ladies so neglected that screen that the Association reclaimed it.¹⁹

By the late nineteenth century, 'respectable' people were complaining that the presence of naked male bathers reduced the appeal of promenading or sitting along the sea front. Naked men lounging on the Wollongong rocks 'at unreasonable hours' in the mid-afternoon or 'bathing in the open sea' and 'monopolising' a Kiama beach on Sunday afternoons provoked calls for the proper authority to 'put a stop to this disgraceful practice'.²⁰ For the complainants, the naked men were less significant as erotic objects, than as selfish impediments to desirable ocean views. Similar contests between nude or minimally clad bathers and well-dressed promenaders over the use of public space also arose on other NSW shores before and after the legalisation of daylight surfbathing in 'respectable' costumes.²¹

Growing interest in bathing and swimming led to formalised men's baths being created at popular men's bathing holes in both Wollongong and Kiama.²² An 1881 public meeting at the Wollongong Council Chambers decided to raise funds for enlarging the men's swimming hole by public subscription, staging a public entertainment and seeking Council assistance.²³ Anticipating a flow of tourists from the South Coast Railway, volunteer labour transformed a small natural bathing pool at Kiama's Blowhole Point into a large, new men's bathing place.²⁴ The arrest of some young men for using the baths in public view, then prompted action to fence in the Blowhole Point baths.²⁵

While improvements to ocean baths were usually funded by public subscription, management and construction of the baths gradually became council functions along with regulation of the hours and costumes for bathing.²⁶ After private subscriptions proved insufficient to fund further improvements to the Blowhole Point baths in the 1890s, the trustees gave the baths over to Kiama Council, which could apply for government funding.²⁷ Care of the Ladies Baths at Pheasant Point was also vested in Kiama Council.²⁸ By 1894, even Gerringong Council was considering the development of ocean baths.²⁹

People held strong views about the regulations that should apply at the ocean baths. An 1885 letter to the *Illawarra Mercury* urged Wollongong Council to give permission for bathing at all hours, as it was 'unreasonable' for men not to use their purpose-built men's baths whenever they could.³⁰ Observing that the Kiama Ladies Baths 'was occupied by ladies almost all day, Sundays included' and that concern to avoid disturbing the bathers prevented people 'from passing by on their way to the cemetery' or the next beach to the north, the Kiama Progress Association insisted by-laws should define proper conduct at the baths and hours for bathing 'so the opportunity would be afforded for others of the public to pass by'.³¹ In 1891, the Kiama Swimming Club expected that 'gentlemen should bathe in trunks' and by 1894, a Kiama bylaw required wearing of 'proper costumes' at the men's and women's baths.³²

In choosing to create new baths for men rather than time-segregate their existing ocean baths, Wollongong and Kiama had recognised women's ongoing demand for bathing and the tourist potential of 'a bath for each sex'. Gerringong residents also sought the 'inestimable boon' of 'a bath for each sex' to end the frustrations associated with gender-segregated bathing hours at the existing baths.³³ With the help of a government grant, Gerringong Council completed Men's Baths on the south side of Boat Harbour in 1911, leaving the baths created earlier on the north side solely for the use of women and children.³⁴

Each of these ocean baths offered a friendly picturesque place for ablutions, play and relaxed socialising and assisted mixing by people, who might not encounter each other in their other business or social dealings. The enthusiasm of Wollongong, Kiama, and Gerringong women for their ladies baths probably reflected the scarcity of other relaxed but affordable, secular public meeting places where respectable women could linger and chat free of the male gaze. At the ocean baths, women and children could shed restrictive clothing, including crinolines and corsets, enjoy free movement in buoyant salt water, 'play the whale' in the waves and contemplate the sea.³⁵ While men had a greater choice of recreational facilities, they too had few respectable venues requiring so little clothing.

Swim Stars and Spectators

The first significant challenges to gender segregation at these ocean baths arose from the growing popularity of competitive swimming and the belief that 'learning to swim was part of a child's education, especially in the case of those living in a seaside town'.³⁶ Swimming was promoted as 'a cleanly habit', an exercise, an art, a sport and most importantly as 'reasonable security against loss of life by drowning' as well as a means of saving the life of others.³⁷

The NSW government fostered swimming in its schools and Sydney metropolitan public schools had a network of boys and girls school swimming clubs by 1897.³⁸ Swimming clubs for boys developed rapidly, while a lack of female teachers who could swim retarded the development of school swimming for girls.³⁹ Wollongong's school children had swimming classes at their ocean baths in 1899.⁴⁰ The NSW Education Department organised Christmas Vacation Swimming Schools in Sydney and also from 1917 in Wollongong and other regional centres.⁴¹

With schools, public baths, swimming clubs and the Education Department all offering tuition in swimming, swimming skills increased among Illawarra residents and visitors. Men's swimming clubs at Kiama and Wollongong fostered swimming skills, instruction and competition.⁴² From the 1890s, swimming carnivals at the Men's Baths at Wollongong and Kiama

attracted paying female and male spectators. While the Kiama Progress Association was surprised that the crowd of 300-400 watching the swimming and waterpolo at an 1894 carnival at the Men's Baths included 'large numbers of the fair sex', women continued to attend carnivals at the Men's Baths in Kiama and Wollongong.⁴³ Sydney's competitive swimming scene produced champions like Annette Kellerman, who swam at the first NSW State Ladies Swimming Carnival in 1902 'in the presence of the trousered sex'.⁴⁴ She gave exhibition swims at the best available venues including the Wollongong Men's Baths.⁴⁵ Carnivals even enabled men to enter the 'sacred precincts' of the Ladies Baths in Kiama and Wollongong as spectators.⁴⁶ Wollongong had developed a new Ladies Baths, more suitable for swimming and offering better facilities for spectators and officials than the earlier Chain Baths.

While developing as sporting facilities, the ocean baths nevertheless remained primarily recreational centres. While privacy had once been a major consideration at the ocean baths, watersports transformed the ocean baths into venues where male and female bodies in bathing costumes were on public display to invited spectators.

Mixed Bathing on the Beaches

After 1903 when daylight bathing in neck-to-knee costumes gained acceptance at Sydney's surf beaches, the regional coastal councils also began to remove restrictions on daylight bathing at public places.⁴⁷ At the surf beaches, where bathers were at risk from rips and sharks, segregated bathing soon became a safety issue. As men were more likely than women to possess surf, swimming and rescue skills, mixed surf bathing eventually became accepted practice on safety grounds. This served to legitimise volunteer surf lifesavers' efforts to rescue male and female surfbathers. Still, even years of legal daylight surf bathing in neck-to-knee costumes failed to convince some Kiama aldermen that surf bathing was more than a passing fad or anywhere near as 'respectable' as bathing in the gender-segregated ocean baths.⁴⁸

While the coastal settlements that developed after the acceptance of mixed bathing at surf beaches created ocean baths open-to-all, gender-segregated bathing continued at the older public baths. The NSW Ladies Amateur Swimming Association founded in 1906 even banned their members from swimming races in front of male spectators until 1912, though the NSW League of Swimmers competitions for professional swimmers offered both men's and women's events on the same program and admitted male and female spectators.⁴⁹

Located some distance from the main local surf beaches, the gender-segregated ocean baths at Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong were much used by local lifesavers, by bathers who also enjoyed the surf beaches and by some who preferred the baths to the surf beaches. Diligent swim training at

Wollongong's Men's Baths caused one group of lifesavers to become known as the Water Rats.⁵⁰ Kiama's holiday-makers rated the baths and the surf as the greatest holiday pleasures.³¹

The standard of the town's segregated ocean baths remained a key concern for local businesses, councils, progress and tourist associations as well as local bathers, swimming and surf clubs and schools. Complaints about the dressing shed at the Kiama Ladies Baths prompted suggestions that 'stringent by-laws need to be passed and stringently enforced' and that the Tourist Association assist the Council to restore the baths to order.⁵² The Gerringong Progress Association urged improvements to the Boat Harbour Ladies Baths for 'the holiday season'.³³

Bending the Gender of Wollongong's Baths

Councils had difficulty keeping all their ocean baths at the competition standard that male and female swimmers wanted. In 1913, Wollongong Council permitted ladies to use the Men's Baths on Wednesday afternoons as even the newer Ladies Baths were too shallow and short for competition.³⁴ When Wollongong's men-only surf clubs then argued against women's afternoons at the Men's Baths, the Ladies Life Saving Club lobbied successfully for the arrangement to continue on different afternoon.⁵³

As men left surf clubs and swimming clubs for military service in World War I, women's swimming became more prominent. The North Wollongong Progress Association and school swimming instructors requested additional times for females to bathe at the Men's Baths.⁵⁶ Wollongong's Girl Guides held carnivals at the Men's Baths until 1931 and the Domestic Science School held girls swimming classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays at Wollongong's Men's Baths until 1927.⁵⁷

Since the Men's Baths were the best training and competition venue, requests from men to use the Ladies Baths usually related only to times when the Men's Baths were unavailable for use. Lifesavers were initially allowed use the Ladies Baths at Wollongong on Tuesday afternoons for swimming instruction when the Men's Baths were unavailable for their use.⁵⁸ Yet in 1921, when heavy usage of the Men's Baths by school classes prompted lifesavers to request access to the Ladies Baths on Tuesdays and Thursdays for swimming instruction, Wollongong Council considered it unwise 'to allow use of such baths by the opposite sex under any circumstances'.⁵⁹

Tourists Challenges Gender-Segregation

By 1915, the *Referees* swimming columnist declared that communities that introduced 'family bathing' found the results so satisfactory in terms of 'improved finances, excellent control and conduct' and most importantly the 'development and extension' of swimming capabilities, that there had been no reversion to a men-only system.⁶⁰ Accustomed to mixed or 'family bathing'

at the surf beaches and at an increasing number of public swimming pools by the 1920s, Sydney visitors began to expect and engage in mixed bathing at the ocean baths in the Illawarra.⁶¹ Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong residents predictably resented and condemned holiday-makers who ignored the local customs and regulations that allocated 'a bath for each sex'.

Believing firmly in separate spheres of activity for men and women, Kiama residents were contemptuous of family ties 'so binding that it was torture for the men to go swimming in one direction and the women in another' especially as the surf beach or any number of natural rock pools offered mixed bathing. They ridiculed the Sydney men who said they accompanied a family party to Kiama's Ladies Baths to 'ensure safety for them'. Kiama's Ladies Baths were considered a precinct 'given over to women folk — prepared for their enjoyment and recreation by funds raised by women's efforts'.⁶³ Into the 1930s, elderly ladies defended their baths by asking male intruders if it was 'very long since you were eight years old?'⁶⁴

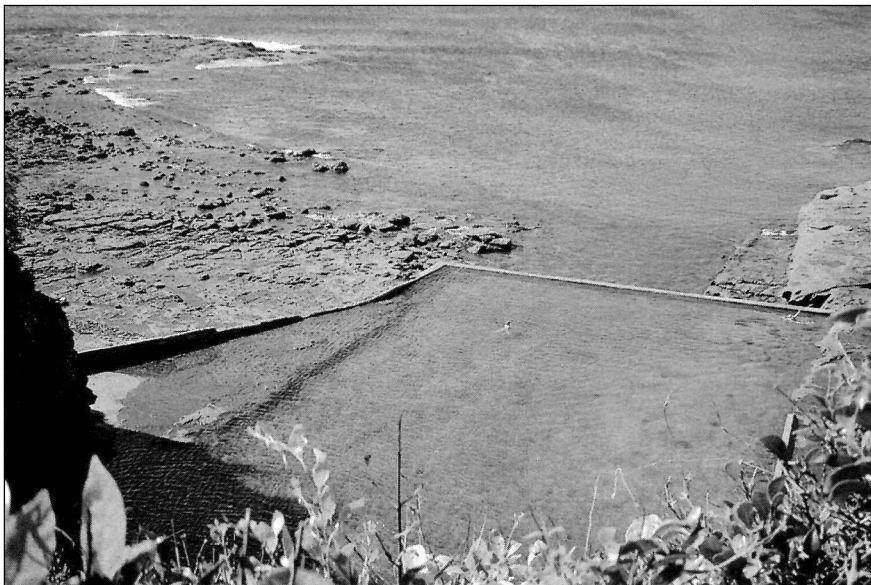
Shellgrit Mining Challenges Gender-Segregation

Gerringong's support for gender-segregated bathing was highlighted in 1925, when a 20-year lease to mine shell grit at Boat Harbour was granted to W.J. Green.⁶⁵ Protests erupted once it was realised that his workmen would be passing many times an hour through the Ladies Baths.⁶⁶ Not only would the shellgrit mining effectively end women's continued enjoyment and use of their baths, it would also diminish Gerringong Council's control of its Boat Harbour reserve and foreshore, devalue Council's ocean baths and deprive local people of convenient supplies of free shell grit.

Having previously mined shellgrit at Sydney's Cronulla beaches near ocean baths used for mixed bathing, Green had few concerns about privacy issues at Gerringong's Ladies Baths.⁶⁷ Even so, Gerringong's mayor resented being asked in a hearing before the Mining Warden, whether ladies wore bathing costumes at the Boat Harbour Baths.⁶⁸ Having organised a ratepayers' petition against the lease, Gerringong Council lobbied the NSW government, formally appealed against the lease and won.⁶⁹ While ostensibly defending women's right to privacy when bathing, the community's vehement opposition to the shellgrit mining lease was also a defence of local customs and practice against the intrusion of an uninvited, ill-mannered outsider. There was no discussion of employing women to carry the shellgrit across the Ladies Baths.

Local Men Challenge Gender Segregation

At times, local men invaded the ladies baths at Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong. Several men including at least one local lifesaver were seen bathing in Wollongong's Ladies Baths.⁷⁰ From 1927 to 1932, aldermen and other Gerringong men claimed seaweed clogging the Men's Baths drove



Gerringong's Boat Harbour Pool is now open to all. Courtesy of Marie-Louise McDermott.

them to use the seaweed-free Ladies Baths.⁷¹ When the Kiama Men's Baths closed for cleaning, men used the Ladies Baths.⁷² As Kiama's Men's Baths were sometimes so congested that 'hundreds could not get in the sheds and had to undress on the rocks,' the appeal of a less crowded Ladies Baths is obvious.⁷³

By the 1920s and 1930s, the increasing value placed on family togetherness was challenging the practice of segregated baths. A Kiama man assumed he did have the 'right to teach children to swim in the children's baths' provided he did not enter the dressing shed.⁷⁴ Even Gerringong's aldermen acknowledged that a man might want to swim with his wife or children or teach his child to swim.⁷⁵ One prominent group of professional women living in a non-family setting had other preferences. Catholic nuns based at or visiting Wollongong's convent still preferred gender-segregated bathing and had a shed erected at the Nuns Pool at no expense to Council.⁷⁶

A Choice of Ocean Baths

Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong preferred that residents and visitors have a choice of segregated and continental baths. Gerringong aldermen held that 'some of our ladies are a little shy' and 'don't want to plunge in with men' and so 'will never go into men's baths or fall in with the continental idea' and that 'costumes often worn at the men's baths are not such as would be worn to continental bathing'.⁷⁷ The availability of sites and funding for



Looking from Wollongong's Continental Baths across to the distant lighthouse on Flagstaff Point.

Courtesy of Marie-Louise McDermott.

new baths, along with each town's resources and vision of itself, influenced the ease and speed of the move to create continental baths, open to anyone who wore the regulation costume and obeyed the bathing regulations.

Acceptance of continental bathing was most rapid in Wollongong, where mixed surfbathing had attracted visitors to the town, caused land values to rise substantially, produced apparent improvements to 'the physique of the women who surfed', life savers who were 'a splendid type of manhood' and 'no noticeable lowering of the moral standard'.⁷⁸ A 1923 public meeting decided to create new baths for continental bathing a little south of the Wollongong Men's Baths.⁷⁹

Community fundraising for WoUongong's Continental Baths highlighted the benefits of health and enjoyment for the local community as well as the 'increased attraction to visitors'. Schools promised fundraising concerts and several ladies committed to running fundraising dances and euchre parties. Council support continued even after the NSW Education Department and the NSW Premier rejected funding applications for the new baths.⁸⁰ Having arranged a £35,000 loan to fund a range of town improvements, Wollongong Council took over the construction of the Continental Baths begun with voluntary labour.⁸¹

Opened in 1926, Wollongong's big, beautiful, modern and free-to-use

Continental Baths were considered one of the most progressive moves in the town.⁸² Opening of the dressing pavilion in 1928 further increased the popularity of these Baths with the local swimming club, scouts, guides, schools and the Education Department's Christmas vacation swimming classes.⁸³ 'Illuminated at night time in the summer season', Wollongong's Continental Baths were 'a mass of bobbing heads and splashing arms and legs' in hot nights and strongly promoted as a visitor attraction.⁸⁴ Despite community objections, Council later began charging admission to these baths.⁸⁵

In less affluent Kiama, Council supported the local Chamber of Commerce's efforts to convert the Men's Baths at Blowhole Point for continental bathing by adding new dressing sheds.⁸⁶ By the end of 1929, 'the baths had proved very popular and had been better patronised than the surf, the dressing sheds 'had been of direct benefit to the trade' and the Chamber had paid off all debts relating to the baths.⁸⁷ The next year, the Chamber installed electric lights for the Blowhole Point baths.⁸⁸ As a social centre on fine nights as well as during daylight hours, the Continental Baths at Blowhole Point were considered 'one of the best advertisements' for the town and 'one of the finest sea baths in the state available day or night.'⁸⁹ A lively swimming club developed, surf club members used the baths for swimming practice and the surf club, the Chamber of Commerce, the Parents and Citizens Association and the swimming club hosted carnivals there.⁹⁰ In accordance with established custom, no admission charges applied at Kiama's ocean baths.⁹¹

Male Demands for Segregated Bathing at Kiama

There was backlash against Kiama's Continental Baths. While the Men's Baths had never been a 'sacred precinct' comparable with the Ladies Baths, there was a demand to continue men's exclusive use of the town's best baths. Kiama men resented women retaining exclusive rights to the Ladies Baths as well as having access to a bath 'constructed for the privacy of men'.⁹² Kiama men wanted 'a little consideration after hours when they got off work' and apparently 'desired privacy as much as the ladies did' for their 'ablutions and sun bathing'.⁹³ There were also fears that a lack of segregated baths might deter some valued male visitors from holidaying at Kiama.⁹⁴

These concerns prompted Kiama Council to impose times for 'men-only' at its 'continental baths'.⁹⁵ This led to predictable confusion, objections from the Chamber of Commerce and concerns about depriving 'promising girl swimmers' of the training facilities they needed as well as damage to tourist businesses.⁹⁶ Many visitors who 'had come from long distances on account of the continental bathing' left 'when they found the restrictions which existed'.⁹⁷ Campers' visions of their summer holidays at Kiama's new

camping grounds did not include ignoring the most convenient baths and it became impossible to maintain segregation at either of Kiama's baths.⁹⁸ It clearly did not 'add to Kiama's popularity' to have 'the police and the Council inspector turn a number of women out' of the Blowhole Point Baths even though 'they have transgressed the rules and such action is in order'.⁹⁹

Even in Wollongong, men were sufficiently concerned about privacy to request modifications to make their dressing sheds more private.¹⁰⁰ Mixed dressing had not achieved the respectability of mixed bathing.

Depression-Era Ocean Baths

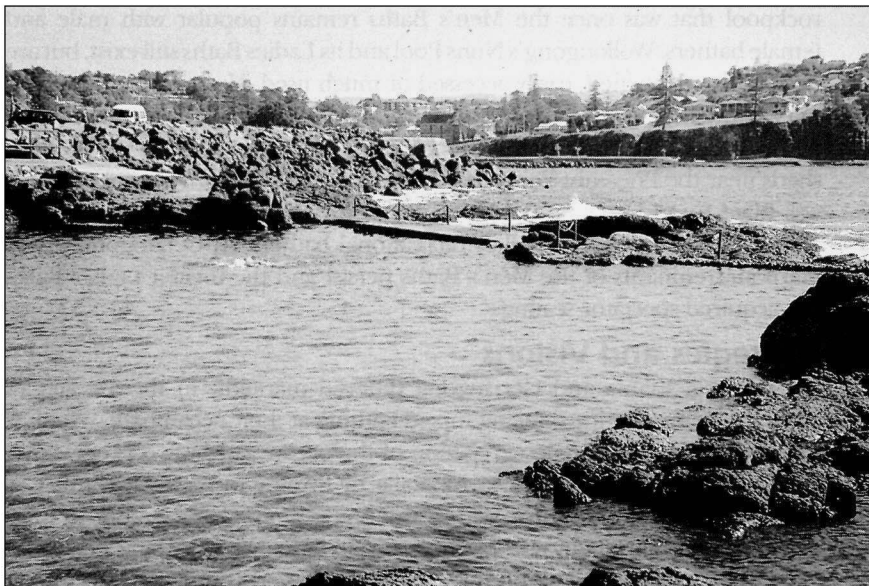
In the 1930s, NSW coastal communities were no longer interested in creating gender-segregated ocean baths. Kiama like Wollongong clearly needed men's baths, women's baths and a separate continental baths. Gerringong Council was also considering a continental bathing place to keep attracting campers to the Werri Beach reserve at the surfing beach to the north of Gerringong's Boat Harbour.¹⁰¹ Government funding for 1930s unemployment relief and town improvement programs made creation of new continental ocean baths at Kiama and Gerringong affordable.

To 'put the crown on Kiama's popularity', Kiama Council used its depression-era funding to construct Olympic-standard baths (110 yards by 40 yards) with a diving pool on the wide rock platform adjacent to the Ladies Baths at Pheasant Point on the north side of the Harbour.¹⁰² Gerringong aldermen were convinced that campers would holiday elsewhere unless baths were constructed at Werri Beach and that 'if the baths attracted a few extra tourists, they would pay for themselves'.¹⁰³ The baths sited in the camper-free 'residents' reserve' at Gerringong's Boat Harbour could remain gender-segregated.

The Kiama Olympic baths equipped with temporary conveniences and dressing sheds were in use from 1934, though funding to complete the baths was still required in 1938.¹⁰⁴ While Gerringong's Werri Beach pool was used from 1935 onwards, it still had a temporary sandbag wall in 1937 when further government funding assured its completion.¹⁰⁵

Diminishing Support for Segregated Ocean Baths

Given the choice between modern, open-to-all ocean baths and gender-segregated pools that were often less versatile, glamorous, popular or well maintained, most men and women preferred to use ocean baths offering mixed bathing. Neglect of the older segregated baths increasingly constrained that choice. The Mother Superior of St Mary's convent complained in 1940, that while Wollongong had two women's baths, neither of them had dressing sheds.¹⁰⁶ Oral history could further explore community attitudes to the increasing neglect of the segregated ocean baths, acceptance of mixed bathing at the ocean baths and the removal of gender barriers to



Looking from Kīama's Blowhole Point Baths across to Pheasant Point. Courtesy of Marie-Louise McDermott.

membership of swimming clubs, surf clubs and winter swimming clubs. While the introduction of mixed bathing at all ocean baths in Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong, testifies to greater equality between men and women and the integration of previously separate spheres for male and female activity it also offers less choice regarding ocean baths.

Ongoing local support for the gender-segregated and the continental ocean baths was based on direct user benefits, commitment to developing swimming skills at survival, recreational and champion level, civic pride and expectations of increased business. Swimming clubs, schools, convents, scouts, guides, surf clubs, progress associations, chambers of commerce and tourist associations supported the ocean baths along with individual bathers and businesses. Community action in the form of fundraising, working bees and lobbying in relation to ocean baths often preceded and exceeded Council support. While Olympic-size ocean baths were still being created in the Illawarra into the 1960s to meet community demand, there was by then much less ongoing demand and support for gender-segregated baths in the Illawarra than at Coogee.

The Present Situation

Ocean baths are still popular in Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong despite increased access to heated, filtered freshwater public and private pools. Wollongong's Continental Baths have been updated. The less formal

rockpool that was once the Men's Baths remains popular with male and female bathers. Wollongong's Nuns Pool and its Ladies Baths still exist, but are no longer maintained, easily accessed or much used. None of Wollongong's once gender-segregated ocean baths now have dressing sheds. Kiama still has baths at Blowhole Point and Pheasant Point, but there are now no dressing sheds near the Pheasant Point Baths, where part of the earlier pool complex was filled in and grassed over. The Werri Beach baths are now used by a winter swimming club as well as recreational bathers. At Gerringong's Boat Harbour, remnants of the Men's Baths persist and the former Ladies Baths has acquired spectator seating.

Strategies and Visions

Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong differed markedly in their strategies and time frames for introducing mixed bathing at their ocean baths. Neither the segregation nor the desegregation of the ocean baths was a process that simply diffused from Britain to Australia or Sydney to regional centres or from major to minor centres within the one region. Commitment to local concepts of respectability and progress and to enhancing the local economy, catering to the demands of both the tourist trade and competitive swimming motivated both the development of the segregated ocean baths and their subsequent desegregation.

The changing visions for the ocean baths in Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong reflected the needs and aspirations of the men and women of those communities as well as their attempts to cater to the tourist trade. Local notions of respectability and preferences for bathing were repeatedly challenged and modified by visitors' expectations and actions regarding mixed bathing. The costly option of providing a totally new baths for continental bathing satisfied visitor preferences and provoked few objections from residents, who could continue to use their segregated baths.

Wollongong and Kiama value their modern ocean baths and the earlier segregated baths on heritage grounds, both as part of their bathing heritage and as part of their historic harbour precincts. Less attention has been given to the heritage value of baths at Gerringong's Werri Beach and Boat Harbour, even to the remnants of one of the last men-only ocean baths constructed on the NSW coast. Evolving visions of these ocean baths now address concerns about sustainability, conservation of marine life, heritage conservation and minimisation of public liability risks, rather than issues of gender-segregation.

Endnotes

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