

Mackerel Beach

On the northwestern shore of Pittwater, on the eastern edge of the Lambert peninsula are two beaches, Great and Little Mackerel.(also spelled Mackarel, Mackeral) Both are named for the abundance of mackerel which were found in the waters nearby. It is still a popular fishing area.

The settlements at both beaches are adjacent to Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. Close by, in the park, are many Aboriginal rock engravings.

In 1823 John Clarke was granted land, comprising most of both Little and Great Mackerel beaches and farmed there together with Martin Burke. Subdivision of Great Mackerel beach in the early 1900s led to the gradual development of more than a hundred homes by the end of the century.

In 1910 Dr Bernard Stiles purchased land at Little Mackerel Beach and built Midholme, a house which still stands today. In 1949 the Labour Council of NSW purchased the land at Little Mackerel Beach as an affordable holiday resort for union members and their families. The resort was called Currawong, and the beach is often called Currawong Beach.

Both settlements can only be reached by water or on foot through the national park.

Memories

"We have always called the little beach directly across the Bay from our cottage, Fishermen's Beach. It comes between the Basin Beach and Little Mackerel Beach (Currawong).

As very young children and for many years after, fishermen would call in there, and one or two would climb a very long, and somewhat rickety, ladder that was erected against a tall tree on the bank above the beach, looking for schools of fish, in the clear, shallow waters below. The remainder of the party waited below with their boats and nets, and when the lookouts spotted the fish they called to their friends, and the men would rush out and net a good catch of various fish."

Audrey Shepherd, "The Halcyon Days of Summer on Pittwater", 1991.

Reading

"...In 1910 Little Mackerel Beach, some 48 acres (19 hectares), was purchased by Mrs. Stiles, wife of Dr. Bernard Stiles of Newtown. Here Dr. Stiles built a home, Midholme, and his son has early memories of the beach when it 'was an idyllic spot, the only private beach in all Pittwater.' Bernard Stiles recalls the lyrebirds, koalas and wallabies that frequented the spot. Wildflowers were thick at Little Mackerel Beach and on the Ku-ring-gai Plateau and the gullies of Little Mackerel provided turpentine timber. There is still turpentine within Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park behind Currawong.

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Currawong remains an idyllic spot with timber cottages, coral trees, casuarinas and the clean white beach with views to Barrenjoey. From the beach there is a towering headland and folds of bush clad hillsides to Great Mackerel Beach."

Joan Lawrence, Pittwater Paradise, 1994.

Flood, fire, and other disasters.

"On the western shores, we are isolated from the emergency services others take for granted, so we provide our own. It's one of the things that binds us together. The recent flooding at Mackerel Beach is a case in point. When the local creek catastrophically flooded, three houses were carried off their foundations, dozens of others had water waist deep throughout, the electricity substation blew up leaving all in darkness and without the means to cook. The rising water emptied septic tanks, and as water rose through the cracks in floors, carpets, bedding, everything absorbent was rendered useless. All houses that were flooded had to be disinfected. There are no roads into Mackerel Beach.

It was the newly formed Mackerel Beach Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade that took over the area, led by Captain Bob Mitchell, and supported by some of the 13 other Brigades in the Shire (all being controlled by the Warringah Shire Council through the Fire Control Officer, Keith Simpson). Houses were cleaned out, hosed out and disinfected using portable generators, and run where needed using a multiplicity of leads. All under the control of Bob, who came to be known as 'the Mayor of Mackerel Beach'. Bob declared the area a Disaster Area, clearing the way for additional aid, and smoothing compensation.

The Ability of the Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades to cope with emergencies was amply demonstrated at Mackerel Beach. Top marks to all who participated and gave their time FREE OF CHARGE. As all Brigade members are Volunteers (that means totally unpaid), the hundreds of hours of assistance given at this time was a gift to those affected by the flood."

David Roots, Perspective, Dec. 1987.

Further reading

David Beaver, Currawong Draft Heritage Assessment, 1999.
History & significance.

Dorothy Blake, "George Clay-the Magic Man of Mackerel", Manly Warringah Journal of Local History, Vol.7, 1999.
Great Mackerel Beach 1960s.

Kim Ketelbey, Cultural heritage assessment: Currawong, Currawong Beach, Pittwater NSW, 2003
Historical information about Currawong and Little Mackerel Beach.

Joan Lawrence, Pittwater Paradise, 1994, Pittwater Pictorial History, 2006.
General history of Great Mackerel Beach and Little Mackerel Beach(Currawong).

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J Macken, Coaster's Retreat, 1991.
History of both beaches.

J Macken, Martin Burke, the Father of Pittwater, 1994.
Settlement in first half of nineteenth century.

John Morcombe, "The last resort; saga continues", Manly Daily, 5/5/1999.
Labour Council NSW move to change use of union workers holiday resort.

Shane Withington, Stand up for Currawong, 1999.
Video showing community significance.