

Tracks to the Era Beach shacks

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The Era Beach Settlement in the Royal National Park just south of Sydney developed gradually through the early years of the last century when coal miners, bushwalkers and campers from Sydney were given permission to make more permanent use of the area. The number of shacks increased in the early 1930s, partly due to the rapid growth of the outdoor recreation movement and partly because of the Depression. People on the move were seeking an alternative life- style and cheap accommodation.

The shack community at Era developed at the intersection of two walking tracks:

- the Helensburgh track which brought the out-of-work miners from Helensburgh to the beach, to provide for their families, catching fish and rabbits, with cheap accommodation.
- the track from Lilyvale station which brought the bushwalkers, holidaymakers and early environmentalists from Sydney.

The later development of the Coastal Walk from the Bundeena ferry via the moorlands and palm jungle to Otford brought the track through Era. This is the track the NSW Premier Bob Carr walks annually.

There is still no road access to Era, the closest road being a dirt road to the Garrawarra car park; then a 2-km walk 'down the hill' (about 300 m in altitude). From Era however there are now a new 'emergency track', the Surf Life Saving Club (SLSC), the IRB (Rubber Duck) or helicopter. Any bushwalkers or campers in trouble are able to be assisted by the SLSC; a radio call has the Westpac helicopter in the valley within 20-30 minutes or a boat ride to Garie to meet an ambulance.

The land was grazing land chosen by Byrne in the 1830s, as a safe drought-free pasture for his cattle. Byrne travelled the coast from the five islands (off Port Kembla) to Botany Bay to find suitable cleared area. The area had been kept as grasslands by the local Dharawal tribe who managed the area with fire. They also used the abundant seafood found on the rough coastal shelf. The local tribe traded with adjoining tribes and evidence in the middens shows that the coastal tracks were well used. Many of the present tracks and roads in the Royal National Park follow much the same lines.

The first holiday shelters were tents that were bundled away into barrels hidden in the ground. Then more permanent shelters were built, of bark, hessian or brattice from the mines over a bush timber frame. The occupiers paid rent to Gray, the farmer leasing the land, who used to ride around and collect sixpence per shack per week.

Although since the original shacks were built there have been many improvements and alterations, the same simple pattern remains. As all materials have to be brought down the hill, the shacks are quite basic and built generally with a timber frame and with iron or fibro walls. There are, however, three stone shacks, built from local beach stone. The materials, particularly in the early days, were scrounged from the mines or were second-hand so that the shacks still have an unsophisticated style.

The National Trust Classification says that the 'Era Conservation Area is a cultural landscape featuring a now rare example of a "depression-architecture"-style community with its original 1920s technology relatively intact.'

The community came together after a drowning at the beach in 1938 and formed a Surf Life Saving Club which has continuously patrolled the beach throughout the surfing season since that time and can boast 'no lives lost' in patrol hours. After World War Two people involved with the arts also recognized the beauty and tranquillity of the area and moved into the community. Hal Missingham, Director of the NSW Art Gallery, came to Era in the 1950s and brought many notable visitors, Max Dupain, Gordon Andrews, David Moore, who have provided their historic record of the community.

The community that formed to provide the Life Saving Club again rallied in 1945 when the Byrne estate was to be sold. A prospectus was drawn up suggesting a golf estate with 150 homes and an auction date set. The community collected funds and pledges to bid at the auction; however it became apparent that L J Hooker was determined to outbid the community. After much lobbying from the community and bush walkers, the area was purchased and added to the National Park to be administered by the National Park Trust. The name 'Royal' was added in 1954 after the visit of Queen Elizabeth II.

By the time the NPWS took over the area in 1967 there were 130 shacks at Era and a diverse holiday community. Despite wide differences in socio-economic groups the community is very strong – an example of a diverse, tolerant and self-policing society. Children learn from an early age to conserve water, fuel and food, how to 'make do' without the trappings of modern society and most importantly how to be part of a responsible community and know the limits. Once you walk 'down the hill' to the beach everyone is equal.

The NPWS for many years tried to remove the shacks and community from Era. However, with the help of conservation reports, heritage studies and much lobbying a new management plan has recommended retention of the major cabin groups. A conservation management plan, currently being prepared by a heritage consultant, is in its final stages. We believe the result of this plan will be a formal linking of the community and shacks, with a flexible management plan that will allow some new occupants. The emphasis will be of integration into the community; people willing to work for the community.

Spending time in these 'low tech' shacks with a supportive community gives users an appreciation of the natural environment and makes users aware of how other people and cultures can live in harmony with their natural environment.

We look forward to 'making tracks' together, in partnership with NPWS.