In the nineteenth century natural 'bogey' holes - in the southern end of Bronte were used by men and women at separate times of the day. One remains there still. Bronte Park reserve was created in 1887 and leased to Waverley Council. A new large pool (approximately 150 feet long) was designed by NSW Public Works civil engineer A. Williams. Constructed from wetland rocks, the pool was and is shaped rather like a whale, or a musical instrument - with the training lanes as strings - or less poetically, like a large hot water bottle. It nestles into the southern cliff, using the cliff as an enclosing wall. It has lovely curves.

First leased to FW Lloyd in 1888, then Harry Wylie in 1895, the pool hosted very popular swimming tournaments run by the Waverley Swimming Club for many years. The Bronte Splashers Club was formed in 1921, with winter swimming as one of its main features. The pool was leased to the Bond family for almost 50 years, with John Bond introducing the 'daring practice of mixed sex bathing on Sundays, holiday afternoons and evenings' in 1923. The pool reverted to Council control in the 1960s, and back to free entry. Waverley Council refurbished the pool in the 1990s and another major upgrade was carried out in 2006. The pool hosts and sustains a vibrant local community, fiercely loyal to 'their' pool but welcoming to the stranger – so go swim! Then have that rare ocean treat – a hot shower!

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**Mary Seabone**

*Belly pressed on earth, ocean breaks below.*

*Blues and greens infinite in hue, waves of perfect happiness.*
4. Coogee - Surf Club pool
Address: end of Carr St, Coogee
Public transport: Buses 313/4 352, 370, 372, 373, 374, M50
Local Council Randwick
Traditional Owners: the Cadigal People

Coogee is blessed with four rock pools. The one pictured above is the most recent. The Ross Jones Memorial Pool - named after a Randwick Alderman and member of the Coogee Surf Life Saving Club, was built in 1947 underneath the iconic Club rooms (first established in 1910) at the southern end of Coogee Beach. The pool also has a long association with local swimming clubs.

It has a natural rock base with three tapered concrete walls, with the fourth side being the natural rock formation. This beautiful little pool, one of the safest of Sydney's rock pools due to its sheltering cliff, and high sandy bottom, was the site of official vandalism in 2003. A contractor working for Randwick Council replaced the much photographed creamy coloured concrete piers which, extending beyond the top of the walls, resembled crenellations on a sandcastle. Stalinist grey blocs appeared instead on the repaired pool – provoking a wounded outcry from the pool community, and irate letters to the local newspaper at this assault on beauty.

The small toddlers' wading pool beside the Ross Jones pool - wading pool beside the Ross Jones pool - wading pool beside the Ross Jones pool - wading pool beside the Ross Jones pool - wading pool beside the Ross Jones pool - wading pool beside the Ross Jones pool - wading pool beside the Ross Jones pool - wading pool beside the Ross Jones pool. Stalinist grey blocs appeared instead on the repaired pool – provoking a wounded outcry from the pool community, and irate letters to the local newspaper at this assault on beauty.

Tidal conditions being optimal or not, there is always some delicious squealing pleasures to be had. Our photo though reveals the more inward pleasures of a rock pool.

Here in this vessel of warmed brine, to bathe
And float myself into serenity.
Diane Fahey: 'Sea Pool' from Sea wall and river
light. (Five Islands Press)
9. Mona Vale Rock Pool

Address: Surfview Rd, Mona Vale – the pool
Public transport: E84 to Surfview Rd, or L90 to Palm Beach - get off on Barrenjoey Rd, at Darley St intersection. 10 min walk.
Local Council: Pittwater
Traditional Owners: Guringai People

This lovely pool, which is at the north end of Mona Vale Beach, started as a natural rock pool on the rock platform which separates Basin and Mona Vale beaches. Lying on an exposed rock shelf without the protection of headlands or other rock formations, the pool can be a thrilling place to swim. It was enlarged and deepened during the Depression by ‘relief’ labour gangs in the 1930s, with supporting infrastructure, (better access to beach, safety fences, handrails) added and maintained over time. The main pool is approx 31 m x 18 m, with a depth of between 1.2 and 1.5 m. It has a children’s wading pool (15 x 10 m) on its western side. Wave action fills and cleans both pools. Lighting is provided for night time swimming.

Like all the pools, Mona Vale rock pool is cherished and guarded by a vital and vibrant community – ‘The Mona Vale pool has SUCH a bond of love and camaraderie down there,’ says photographer Bruce Jackson who took this photo. Our swimmer is part of a group of regulars - ‘the sisterhood’ who greet the morning and each other down at the pool.

All creatures desire reunion
With the first pool of their advance
Shé Hawke, Aquamorphia

DATE    DAY    SEPTEMBER 2016
1      THU     ●
2      FRI     ●
3      SAT
4      SUN
5      MON
6      TUE
7      WED
8      THU
9      FRI
10     SAT
11     SUN
12     MON
13     TUE
14     WED
15     THU
16     FRI
17     SAT
18     SUN
19     MON
20     TUE
21     WED
22     THU
23     FRI
24     SAT
25     SUN
26     MON
27     TUE
28     WED
29     THU
30     FRI
10. Newport Beach

Access from Newport beach or walkway at cnr of Calvert Parade and the Boulevard, Newport
Public transport: 187, L87, E87, 188
Local Council: Pittwater
Traditional Owners: Guringai People

Although naturally occurring rock pools, enhanced by Pittwater Council, were already in use at Newport at the turn of the 20th century, these deteriorated in the following decades. Eventually, after locals had vigorously petitioned Council, one large new pool was built in 1925 at the southern end of the beach. (Contractor - T Birmingham). With a long rectangular shape (53 x 16m) the pool has a natural rock bottom with concrete walls.

Max Dupain took one of his most iconic beach pics here in the early 1950s – At Newport Baths - featured bronzed men in amazing trunks - and two women in bathing caps. Despite harbouring such sartorial and pectoral splendour, the pool has also suffered periods of neglect – sometimes rock slides even blocked access. Eventually toilets and a changing shed were built in 1966, and reconstruction of the western wall took place in 1984. The pool is now back in action – very much part of things again.

Being in a very exposed location, the pool is naturally filled and refreshed by tidal action.
Listen to water narrate the world
murmur to itself
an un-predictive text...

Shé Hawke, Aquamorphia
Are the ocean rock pools of Sydney unique? As uniquely, as specifically Sydney as those other icons, the Bridge and the House? Perhaps in their sheer quantity – 30 at the last counting, (1994, by the National Trust of Australia -NSW) and in their having been socially as well as physically engineered. The pools represent significant, if often threatened, Australian values: they provide a public communal space where physical health, social justice and a sublime beauty meet.

The pools are the reasons for the superlative Australian skills in water. Long before the rise of the post war municipal swimming pools, and for some years afterwards, Australia’s Olympians, hopeful or actual, swam their laps under the blue or grey skies, states. Mina Wylie and Fanny Durack, the golden (and silver) girls of the 1912 Olympics swam to greatness after practising in Mina’s father’s rock baths at Coogee.

Many of the pools were created on sites where natural rock formations had already created some form of swimming hole – in at least two Coogee pools there is oral memory of Indigenous use. These pools were then used by the white invaders, but slowly at first. The Australian love affair/cultural identification with the beach was not an immediate one. Apart from the distinct lack of leisure for the working and convict classes, European cultural beliefs prevented an immediate embrace. Fear – mainly of sharks – was a constant early inhibiting factor. Gender another. Not knowing how to swim a further, widespread complication.

From the 1830s NSW authorities attempted to regulate public bathing, even to the extent of banning daylight ocean swimming in ’public view’. Public morality in the ever-disciplined colony was threatened not just by the mixing and mingling of genders, races and classes - that always dreaded ‘larrikin’ element - in the unmediated public space of the beach, but by the then usual practice of swimming in the nude.

By the later nineteenth century physical fitness and being outdoors had begun to be seen as a public and personal good, and instructions ‘in the noble art’ of swimming increased in popularity, for women and girls as much as for men. Sydney’s famous self-styled ‘professor of swimming’ Fred Cavill argued in the Sydney Morning Herald of 1881, that if more girls learned, ‘we would not see so many sickly women. Sydney’s famous self-styled ’professor of swimming’ Fred Cavill argued in the Sydney Morning Herald of 1881, that if more girls learned, ‘we would not see so many sickly and delicate ones as we do now.’

Eventually Sydney’s eastern councils responded to the tensions between health and morality by creating either gender specific pools – as at Coogee – or – in the case of Bondi and Bronte - ocean pools which were available to men and women at different times, with everyone instructed to wear appropriate bathing costumes. As almost all clothing was made at home in those days, a great variety and experimentation ensued.

Not till 1903 was daytime swimming permitted at Sydney beaches – with beach raids by Council inspectors aimed at curbing any overt male displays of genitalia. Randwick had a special Inspector of Nuisances for this task. While this can be seen as an inherently amusing or prurient activity of an overly controlling state, it was also an attempt to protect women’s rights to access to the ocean.

The ocean pools themselves had rapidly become the homes of the seminal Australian swimming clubs – usually divided on gender lines as that other great Australian battle raged. The Randwick and Coogee Swimming Club, formed in 1886, would not allow women in until 1964. Bondi Icebergs (founded 1929) held off till 1994. There had been women swimmers, surfers and surf life savers before World War II but after the war they were marginalised, even banned from beach cultural institutions – in particular surf lifesaving which took on a paramilitary character, ’one of the many complex ramifications on society of injured and disturbed men returning from the Great War’ (Curby, p214).

The women, however, organised themselves in various tenacious Clubs – and held on at least to the territory of the pools; among them Bondi Ladies Amateur Swimming Club (founded 1907), Bronte Amateur Ladies, Dee Why Ladies (1922) while Randwick Coogee Ladies Amateur Swimming Club (1922) has guarded and cherished the last women only pool in Australia. The Ladies Clubs have all produced women swimming champions, as well as teaching generations of young Sydneysiders how to swim.

There were two distinct periods of construction or expansion of Sydney’s ocean rock pools. The later nineteenth century saw early forms of public private alliances as local authorities built pools and leased them to private entrepreneurs or swimming clubs. Both Bronte and Bondi ocean pools were designed by a public works civil engineer, working for the NSW Water Board. These were opened to the public in the early 1890s while Randwick Council had excavated their Coogee pools as early as 1874.

The second period of creation, particularly on the Northern Beaches, was in the 1930’s – the Depression era - when councils built pools with unemployed labour gangs. Les Murray’s poem, The Ocean Baths, honours them – ’I’m thinking of/workers/who made pool-cementing last, neap tide by neap/ right through the Depression/ then went to the war’ (Dog fox field, 1990). Throughout the Depression the beaches and ocean pools of Sydney were refuges for the poor and unemployed. Large groups of unemployed people (mainly men but some women) regularly walked from the inner city to the beaches. During the worst period of the depression, newspapers reported crowds of up to 100,000 on Bondi Beach. They swam, they walked, they smoked, they moved amongst circus type performers, gymnasts, jujitsu tournaments, and they formed the Bondi Icebergs club.

The pools have suffered periods of neglect – when post-war (WW2) virtues of ‘clean’ chlorine combined with renewed fears of the dirt and danger of wild nature. In later decades, fear of Sydney’s uncivil ways with sewage systems, which continued up until the 1990s, kept many people away. Rising prosperity and at-home entertainments have also threatened the pools’ popularity. In most recent years, preoccupations with safety have grown – and in particular as children’s playspaces have been ‘purged of dangerous and challenging elements.’ Chain surfing, however, a thrilling if also dangerous practice, is undertaken at almost all the pools –usually by youngsters, most often boys – part of modern day masculinity initiation rituals.

Social changes are evident too in the way in which some of the first pools were created by locals who hacked or blew away bits of ancient and sacred rock, to today’s more eco-anxious mores where Maroubra Seals winter swimming club had to have permission in 2004 from the Dept of Fisheries to extract sea urchins from its pool.

The pools have always had their guardians – their communities, their defenders of the realm. Guarded and supported by local organizations in relationship with their councils, they are also evidence of another great Australian public good – local government. Blessings on all the Councils which have served these pools.

With less emphasis nowadays on the pools as training places for competitive swimmers, there is more room in the water and out of it for play, for brailing (breaststrokting and talking – a wonderful new word coined by swimming bloggers the MrsGs), for reflection and simply admiring the sublime view of sky and rock and water. As down on the beach the strutting and fretting of perfect bodies continues, the ocean rock pools have always provided a gentler place of acceptance for the unファッションable body – including the aging body, the wounded body, the shy body.

Our intention here with the production of this calendar has been to celebrate these wonderful pools, as places of sublime beauty, spiritual and physical revivification, social community, creative inspiration, and the provision of personal retreat and solace in the midst of the hubbub of the beach. We hope you get inspired to escape the iWorld and come down to the pools yourselves. You’ll be very welcome.

Mary O’Connell – writer and researcher
Mike Gal – photographer
Bruce Jackson – photographer Mona Vale
Helena Brusic – designer

Main References:
Curby, Pauline, Randwick, Randwick City Council, 2009
And ‘Ocean baths’, www.dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/ocean_baths [accessed 27 March 2013]

The National Trust of Australia (NSW) Sydney Harbourside


There are also increasingly many wonderful blogs on the pools The MrsGs are fun at http://swimmingsydneythrmsgspot.wordpress.com

handmaidpress@hotmail.com