



**BIRKENHEAD HERITAGE  
SOCIETY INC.**



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**Newsletter  
March/April 2017**

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**Next Event**

**Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> March 2pm.**

**St Andrews Church Hall, 172 Hinemoa Street, Birkenhead**

**Guest Speaker**

**Jim Young – boatbuilder**

**The Young boat designs are legend amongst members of the Auckland sailing community. Jim will share how he founded his own company based here in Birkenhead, and developed and built his many yacht designs, still sailing today.**

Jim's book 'Jim Young – designer, boatbuilder, sailor' is a cracker, starting off with his early sailing and boatbuilding career as an apprentice to Roy Lidgard. Working on minesweepers during the Second World War and then the challenges and dramas of starting out in business on his own at the age of about 25, building wooden boats in a small shed in Little Shoal Bay in Birkenhead."

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**New Zealand History Federation Inc.  
Annual Conference and Weekend of Events  
24<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> March in Taranaki**

A bus will be taking and returning passengers en route to and from Auckland.  
More details and costs on the Federation and Birkenhead Heritage Websites.

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**Coming Events**

**Saturday April 8th 2pm.**

**Stories Day will be at St. Andrews Church Hall  
172 Hinemoa Street**

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**A reminder the Annual General Meeting on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> May 2pm.  
and Annual Subscriptions due. The Speaker to be advised.**

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## **A piece of Birkdale history: How a village cricket ground became a retirement village**

When a giant crane appeared in the sky far above Verrans Corner last year it was obvious that something big was planned for the large area once known to locals as Osborne Park. Today in 2017 the Bert Sutcliffe Retirement Village with its lovely view of bush and sea fills that space.

Although we remember Osborne Park mainly as a cricket ground, the land has had many other uses which reflect the social and rural aspects of the Birkdale and Birkenhead community during the last hundred years. It was once the local rubbish tip, well known to foraging children, a pound for lost animals, and a dog-dosing strip in the days when hydatids were a problem. It has also been the Council Works yard, a Caravan Park with family cabins available for short and longer terms, and a well-patronized Convention Centre and restaurant.

This area between Kauri Road, which leads to 'Fern Glen' on the old Fisher property and Waipa Street, opposite the Birkenhead Transport bus station has a history which goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century - 1905 in fact - when it was purchased by the Birkenhead Borough Council for a water reservoir. The Council envisaged that the area as a whole would be the Sporting Centre of Birkenhead. Only the present tennis courts at John C. Kay Park, (named after a Mayor of the 1920's), located nearby at the top of Verrans Road remain today as part of the original plan.

The Council's consulting engineers advised that higher land would be more desirable for a reservoir than the 1905 purchase. So additional land was bought on the crest of the hill (Bagot's Hill, which is said to be the highest point on the North Shore) to house the first household water supply for Birkenhead. The water was piped from Lake Pupuke, a source of much criticism on account of its brown tinge and sometimes fishy taste when the lake was low. In 1913 there were ninety-four household consumers in Birkenhead but many people continued to use their rainwater tank supply. Later water quality improved as it was piped under the harbour near Meola Reef to Kendall Bay and up towards Balmain Road and on to the Reservoir from Auckland City supplies.

Since 1905 the Birkdale Cricket Club had been playing on a series of paddocks in the part of Birkdale now called Beach Haven - Hadfield's, Earl's/Cooper's, and Lee's paddocks in the present Beach Haven (then Puriri) Road area. The club membership included farmers from the small landholdings, fruit growers whose livelihood was based on the produce they sent to the Auckland market, and the Chelsea Sugar Refinery workers, who together were "a reflection of the community with a variety of practical skills"<sup>1</sup> The cricket club was just one of the many social clubs which brought the community together before the days of easy transport and entertainment, and the only one who served everyone with strawberries at their annual Boxing Day match.

In 1934 when the Borough Council started to discuss providing more professional sports facilities, cricket was obviously a strong contender, and especially as Mr Ernie Osborne, the Secretary of the Cricket club was also Chairman of the Council's Works Committee and a future Mayor of Birkenhead (1936-1953). He was aware that most of the land Council had bought earlier was still vacant and unused except as a rubbish dump.

In 1935 the Great Depression was at its height; unemployed men were given work through the Birkenhead Council and they provided the manpower to develop the contour of the land at Verrans Corner into something more like a sports ground. So it was that an area big enough for cricket games was levelled, subsidized by the Government Number Five scheme. It took a year for seventy men with picks and shovels to flatten out the land and using railway wagons dispose of the rubble, into the gully below. (I hear that as boys Gladys Durham [founding member of the Birkenhead Heritage Society] and Frank Reid 'helped' in the weekend by pushing the wagons over as well!)

At the opening of Osborne Park for the cricket season of 1936 a match was played between two third grade teams, Birkdale and Kings Old Boys with a tent erected as a pavilion. The Auckland Star said of the development "It has a beautiful outlook, perfect drainage and a natural amphitheatre."<sup>2</sup> Sundays at Verran's Corner now echoed with the sound of bat on ball and watching the cricket at Osborne Park became a pleasant tradition. From the beginning it was up to the members to develop the terracing, roll the pitch and prepare the ground for play.

During the Second World War with so many men overseas the activity of the club was curtailed, but after the war, in 1947, came great enthusiasm and the biggest growth in its history. Undeterred by several land-slides threatening the ground, the club did a great deal of fund-raising and, with volunteer labour, a pavilion and changing room were built. Funds were needed for provision of gear especially for the schoolboy teams who were being coached by club members. Teams were successful in Auckland-wide competition and a successful women's team was fielded by Birkdale during the years 1955 – 61. The club was the centre of social life in the district with dances at Deans Hall Beach Haven, Victoria Hall Birkenhead and Glenfield Hall. The number of well-known local characters who were part of the club would be too many to name.

The population of Birkdale grew but it remained a close-knit and semi-rural community until the Harbour Bridge construction in 1958 brought great changes, the main one being a huge population increase. The Birkenhead Cricket Club, which seems to have folded early last century, was brought to life when a Sports Centre was opened at Memorial Park Birkenhead in 1958. The new facilities were thought superior and seeing the chance of more opportunities for players in a larger combined club Birkdale agreed to merge with them as Birkdale-Birkenhead. Glenfield was then included with the two previous clubs and after various other name changes, today they are simply Birkenhead Cricket Club again.

As for Osborne Park, sadly the cricket days were over and the land was used for the other purposes mentioned before, but never has there been such a dramatic change as the present one. However, the naming of the Retirement Village after Bert Sutcliffe maintains a link with the game. Bert was born in Auckland and was a representative cricketer for Auckland, Otago and New Zealand. He went to Takapuna Grammar where he excelled at cricket and spent his retirement years on the North Shore. Through the 1960's and 70's he was the idol of every schoolboy and his unassuming manner gained him the name that Michael Boock gives him in his biography – an Everyday Hero.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1990's the Birkenhead Council made a great contribution to the outlook of Verran's Corner and now the new retirement village by planting a selection of native trees along the roadside, on the old club terraces, and they have since grown to maturity. The only exotic tree which people may have noticed is the large oak, probably self-seeded but possibly planted, which marks the spot of a cricket pavilion, now long gone.

Story and photos contributed by member Elizabeth Collins

#### References

1. A Century of Cricket; Birkenhead City Cricket Club, 1998
2. Auckland Star, Papers Past
3. The Last Everyday Hero; The Bert Sutcliffe Story, Richard Boock, 2010



Mayor, Mr EJ Osborne and Mr Ritchie McDonald, the local MP, at the 1953 season opening day.



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From exactly 100 years ago – during the First World War:

### **A SECOND BIRKENHEAD**

BRITISH TRANSPORT MINED OFF THE AFRICAN COAST. TROOPS, MAGNIFICENT CONDUCT. BEHAVE AS IF ON PARADE. (A. and N.Z. and Reuter.) (Received 0.35 a.m.) LONDON, March 1917. The Press Bureau states that the transport *Tyndareus*, with a battalion of the Middlesex Regiment aboard, struck a mine on February 9 off Cape Agllhas in a strong south-easterly gale, and began to settle after the explosion, the propellers showing above the surface. The men paraded in perfect order, the roll was called, and the order to stand easy was given. The whole battalion sang songs and choruses. Two steamers dispatched to the rescue arrived in half an hour. Although faced by the probability of imminent death the troops maintained the same steadfast courage and discipline as in that famous incident in the vicinity where the *Birkenhead* was lost.

Thanks to the devotion and perseverance of the captain, officers, and engineers the ship was saved and reached Simonstown under her own steam. Two of her holds "were flooded and another was leaking. The King expressed deep admiration of all ranks for the manner in which they had upheld the *Birkenhead's* cherished tradition." The publication in England of this splendid story of British heroism has evidently been greatly delayed for some obscure and mysterious reason. The South African papers published full accounts of the mining of the vessel the day after its occurrence, and the King sent his congratulations a day later.

The story of the rescue was thus told in the Rand "Daily Mail": With reference to the accident to the transport *Tyndareus*, it appears that about fifteen minutes before the accident she passed the *Oxfordshire*, bound for Capetown, and was being followed by the *Eumaeue*, which most of the men were watching at the time. The *Tyndareus* was "just getting into her stride," as one of the men put it, and "was rapidly leaving the *Eumaeus* in the distance, when the mine was struck and shook the troopship from stem to stern. The "assembly" was at once sounded, and the troops, wearing lifebelts, lined the decks in perfect order. The ship was settling down by the head, with her propellers hanging well out of the water. It appeared almost certain that the vessel would sink before assistance could reach her, but though they must all have realised their imminent peril, the demeanour of the men did not suggest that they were facing death, but that they were parading for long leave. As soon as the roll had been called and the order "Stand easy" given, a songster started the "Long, "Long" Trail," and in a few seconds the whole of the gathering, from end to end of the ship, had taken up the refrain of the latest marching song. Then, came the old favourite, "Tipperary," and for half-an-hour afterwards, white an ominous incline of the deck towards the bows became more and more noticeable, chorus after chorus swept along the lines, while both the *Oxfordshire* and the *Eumaeus* were racing to the rescue.

The wireless had not been damaged, and " S.O.S." signals were immediately sent out, whilst boat after boat was lowered to the water. One of the boats was upset in its descent and a young seaman, without a moment's hesitation, jumped overboard and succeeded in righting it. The same man, a little later, distinguished himself by diving from the lifeboat and rescuing the regimental dog "Paddy." Another example of pluck was given by half a dozen privates who were engineers by profession. They volunteered to assist in the engine-room, and exchanging khaki for overalls, did splendid work in the most dangerous spot in the ship. Six boats had been lowered when the *Oxfordshire* followed a few minutes later by the *Eumaeus*, arrived, and the work of transferring the troops was begun. A strong wind was blowing and the sea was very choppy, but the work was carried out in little over an hour, and the rescuing vessels turned for port. Two warships took the crippled liner in tow.

It appeared to be an almost hopeless task, as she was well down by the bow, but wonderful seamanship on the part of the officers and crews of all three vessels triumphed, and the *Tyndareus* was safely brought into port on Wednesday. The troops were enthusiastic in their praise of the officers of the *Tyndareus*. The captain who they say, was "magnificent," found time, while directing the operations to cheer and encourage the men as they stood on the decks, singing choruses. "Keep it up, lads." he kept shouting to them, "all's well"; while the troops cheered him again and again in return. The following telegrams passed between the Naval Commander-in-Chief, Simonstown, and the Admiralty on the occasion of the accident.

From Naval Commander-in-Chief to Admiralty: - "The behaviour of Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment on board the steamship *Tyndareus* after the accident to that ship, there being a large quantity of water on board and the ship apparently sinking by the head in a heavy swell, was most praiseworthy and equal to the *Birkenhead* tradition of the British Army on the same spot. It was only due to this that no lives were lost on the boats. The ship was saved by the coolness and perseverance of the captain, officers and engineer's staff."

From the Admiralty to the Naval Commander in Simonstown: - "The following has been received from His Majesty the King "To the Officer commanding ..... Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, my admiration of the conduct by all ranks on the occasion of the accident to *Tyndareus*. In their discipline and courage, they worthily upheld the splendid tradition of the *Birkenhead*, ever cherished in the annals of the British Army. – George R.I."

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The story of the sinking of the H.M.S. *Birkenhead* on the 26<sup>th</sup> February 1852 near Capetown was covered in a previous Birkenhead Heritage Newsletter. It was suggested as one of the possible origins of the name Birkenhead for our suburb.

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Marcia Roberts: Editor.