

TIMELINES

The Quarterly Newsletter of Murwillumbah Historical Society Inc.

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Welcome

Welcome to the July 2022 edition of *Timelines*, the newsletter of Murwillumbah Historical Society.

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Our Austral Cafe

Thanks to new contributor Lois Brown a'Court we are able to share her research on the history of this beloved Murwillumbah icon. For Lois and for so many others who grew up in the Tweed, "the Austral now stands as the lone remnant from the milk bar and café culture that once dominated social life in Murwillumbah".

A GREAT PLACE TO EAT AND MEET

For many locals, returning ex-residents, and visitors alike, the Austral remains "a great place to meet and eat". This was the catch phrase synonymous with the Austral during the decades that it was owned by the Vlismas family, the original owners, who sold the business in 1985.

Since then it has changed hands several times, but each of the successive owners has

recognised the role that the Austral plays in community life and in the words of the current owners the Austral has provided Murwillumbah "with a century of service".

The establishment of the Austral café is the story of a young Greek migrant who arrived in Australia in the early 1900s, with few possessions, no money and no English, and through hard work and with business acumen, prospered and helped create the café culture that was a significant part of Murwillumbah's social fabric, particularly in the forties and fifties.

Con Vlismas, the eldest of six children, was only 15 when his father managed to scrape together his fare to Australia, which was seen as the land of opportunity. Con left his native Greek island of Kythera with the expectation that he would bring each of his younger brothers to Australia as he became established. What a huge responsibility for a young man of 15, but through the years Con



The Austral Café today (photo Lois Brown a'Court).



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The first Austral Café c. 1933 (photo: Lois Brown a'Court).

fulfilled this promise to his father and brought his younger brothers John, Joe, Nick and Theo to the Tweed.

The 12 English pounds Con's father paid for his fare on the tramp ship *The Roan*, entitled Con to only a deck chair on his journey to Australia and required him to do some menial tasks as well.

In 1919, only nine years after Con had arrived in Australia, he was opening *The Novelty Candy Store* in Murwillumbah. In the intervening years he had worked hard, initially within the Greek community in Sydney and then securing a job in the confectionary trade in Manly which led to him managing a confectionary business in the city.

It was while he was working in the city and hearing about opportunities available on the booming north coast that he decided to see for himself and consequently decided to settle in Murwillumbah.

Con sold sweets and also homemade ice creams in *The Novelty Candy Store*, on the uphill side of the post office, and business boomed, which allowed him to move to larger premises along the Main Street. Here he expanded the menu to include light refreshments, which substantially supplemented his income during the winter months when ice cream sales were down. In 1927, two years after he married Alma Mapp in Murwillumbah, he changed the name to *The Austral Café*.

"An anecdote told by Con's son George regarding the Austral's name suggests that it was a slightly

inebriated sign writer who came up with the name when Con couldn't decide what he wanted."

The Austral went from strength to strength and began making and selling baked goods and serving full meals, and soon became famous for its pies and fruitcake.

The golden era of café culture in Murwillumbah was undoubtedly the forties and fifties and with perfect timing, just prior to World War II Con Vlismas had relocated the Austral to new, state of the art premises, a few doors further along the main street. All that remains of these premises, now

occupied by *New Releases Antiques*, is the curved glass frontage, after it was gutted for occupation by *Tweed Cellars*.

"With its curved structural-glass window frontage and sculptured mirrors lining the internal walls, his new café was a fine example of the art moderne architectural style. The soda fountain was boasted as the most up-to-date in Australia."



The Austral Café c. 1940 (photo: Lois Brown a'Court).

During the war years, the upmarket Austral café was one of the most popular establishments in Murwillumbah. Together with the *Belle Vue* and the *Civic*, the Austral provided a familiar place for the American service men on R and R in Tweed Heads, these cafes all being modelled on the latest American trends in décor and service.

The Austral provided a similar range of fare to the other cafes, including light lunches, three course meals, grills, and ice cream sundaes, malted milks, milk shakes and cool fruit drinks from the milk bar.

This was the time of the Austral's crisp lemon uniforms and starched caps, all adding to the glamour of "meeting and eating" at this popular place. The reality of life for the waitress, however, was long hours, waiting on tables. The Austral also needed a bevy of other workers preparing and cooking food, washing up, cleaning the kitchen and doing the many other tasks involved in running a café. It got to the stage during the severe labour shortage of the war years where Con's sons, George and Jack, would ride their bikes down from school at lunchtime to help out.

The Austral was so popular during the war years that it was forced to set up a roped off waiting area so that hovering patrons waiting for a table wouldn't impede the path ways of the waitresses moving around the café.

The Austral assisted local fund raising for the war effort by providing an outlet for cake sales. The Hawken family remembers their grandmother, Mrs Florence Gould, telling them about the sponge cakes she made in relation to this activity. Mrs Gould, whose sponges were prize winners at the Tweed Show, would rise early to make six sponges to sell at the Austral on fund raising days.

Over the years Con's continual experimenting with ice cream led him to develop numerous different sundaes, such as the popular tutti-fruiti and the innovative, chocolate-coated ice cream called a Bonz-a-bar.

"All of the Vlismas children would assist in the production of the Bonz-a-bars, gathered around a large table, cutting, dipping and wrapping the ice creams in their own printed glassine paper wrappers. They were sold for 3 pence."

From an early age the four Vlismas children became well acquainted with all aspects of the catering business, helping out in the cafe after school and during weekends and holidays.

The Austral's milk shakes and innovative sundaes were always made from real ingredients, even while everyone else switched to using artificial essences. Their patrons enjoyed



"This was the time of the Austral's crisp lemon uniforms and starched caps" (photo: Lois Brown a'Court).

homemade caramel and butterscotch flavourings and real fruit in the tutti- fruitis. The milk was purchased from McDonald's Commercial Road pure bred Jersey dairy farm, which was renowned for its rich cream content.

The ice cream sundaes came in a range of prices:

- * 6 pence – Nutti Fruiti and Tutti Fruiti. One scoop of ice cream served with fruit salad and whipped cream and nuts on the Nutti Fruiti.
- * 9 pence – Kia-Ora and Peach Melba. Two scoops of ice cream. Peach Melba had canned peaches arranged around the ice cream with strawberry syrup, nuts and whipped cream.
- * 1 shilling – The Austral Special, Meet-Me-Here and Pick-Me-Up. These were made using the special Neapolitan ice cream made by Con.

Fruit drinks were made using real fruit and the orange included grated skin and sugar to give it a stronger flavour.

Con made all his own ice creams until after WWII and in the summer months The Austral would use 50 gallons of milk a day in milkshakes. After WWII the new dairy treatment methods such as

pasteurisation stopped many small businesses from producing their own ice creams.

It hadn't been easy keeping the business afloat during WWII, due to restricted hours, wartime



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rationing and staff shortages but the family managed and in 1945 Con's children officially became involved in the business.

At that time, Jim was in the Air Force, Jack had just left school, George was doing his Leaving Certificate and Norma was still at school.

Con ceased trading in 1958, the year that the current Austral café was established by Con's sons Jack and George, on the site where it still stands, still looking much the same as it did back then.

Older Tweed residents who were at high school in the late 50s and 60s would well remember that the Austral was where kids liked to hang out after school, especially on sports afternoons.

As well as the passionfruit ice cream sodas, which were a firm favourite, there were the amazing milkshakes, in particular the house specialty, the Jaffa milk shake, but most decadent of all were their cream shakes!

The Vlismas family story and that of the Austral Cafe was one of those featured in the background information for the exhibition, Milkshakes, SUNDAES AND Café CULTURE, which toured to a number of regional NSW venues over a couple of years, starting in 2003.

The basic content of the exhibition was provided by the Museums and Galleries Foundation, and each regional community contributed its own local flavour.

The exhibition was on display in Murwillumbah at the old Tweed Art Gallery in 2005.

Immy McKiernan, who put the Tweed display together, managed to track down some rare memorabilia, including embossed crockery from Con Vlismas's Austral Café and also from Mark Cassimatis's Civic Cafe in Murwillumbah.

It is from the notes for this exhibition and from information found on a site "Aliens of the Tweed and Brunswick"

(https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~aliens/history/chapter_1.htm)

that I've written this account of the Austral's role as "a great place to meet and eat"

in the life of the Tweed community.

For so many of the older Tweed residents, who grew up immediately post-war, the Austral will always be associated the Vlismas era. Those times during the 50s and 60s before television took over, the Austral would be jam packed on a Saturday night after the pictures, with people enjoying waffles and malted milks.

Slowly as times changed, the other cafes, the Civic and the Belle Vue, closed down. The Austral now stands as the lone remnant from the milk bar and café culture that once dominated social life in Murwillumbah.

Lines out of Time

"Lines" is a regular section featuring personal, news and other items highlighting our engaging past.

Betty Hamill continues with Part 7 of the story of the life and times of her father Hec Robertson, as transcribed from family tape recordings.

Living with Horses

I was secretary of the P.P.U. (Primary Producers Union) for quite a few years at Cudgera. Not that I wanted the job but Dad used to push me into these jobs for the experience.

I never regretted it, but Dad was always a great one for shoving me into things. He realised that by pushing people into jobs it helped them eventually. Lots of things I'd try to quibble about he would say "You can do it no trouble".

When I was about ten our friends The Salters bought a pony for my mate Arthur. It was a mad headed thing that just ran away with Arthur when he tried to get on it. Dad said "Bring it over here and Hec will quieten it for you". In the meantime a chap came to Salters' to collect some cattle and his horse went lame so they put him on Arthur's pony. He got on the pony, it took off, galloped up to the fence, stopped dead and then swung around leaving poor old Ernie on the fence. So that finished that. Ernie wouldn't ride it anymore.

Dad still reckoned I could handle it. So the pony came to our farm. At our place Dad had me push the pony round and around the house faster than the pony wanted to go. Mum was a bit upset watching this from the verandah but had to be ignored. Dad kept calling out to keep the pony going even when it wanted to stop. A lesson learned.

Later when Salters moved to Boat Harbour we had to drive their cattle about twenty five miles. I did one trip. The hardest part was getting them across the Murwillumbah bridge.

Putting cattle across the bridge from either way was always an effort. When you would get up to the bridge, the front ones would stop and fiddle. Then some galah would come driving across the bridge and they would break back. Well each side of the bridge then had three roads leading up to it so you had to try to block them and keep them from getting up these roads. The horses were not good on the cement road approaches and they would slide about. Another hazard was the footpaths. Some cattle would get onto the footpath in front of shop windows which made it very difficult to follow on horseback. It was a great relief to get them onto the bridge.



Hec and Tony ready for a Light Horse parade (photo: Betty Hamill)

We used him for everything, ploughing, in the pig cart, Light Horse Parades. He was a very good horse to ride, a very good walker, which meant when you were riding with someone else they would have to be urging their horse all the time to keep up. He was also a good stock horse. If you could sit on him, he could muster the cattle on his own. If the cattle started to lag he would reach out and bite them on the butt of the tail. He was a most docile beast, easy to catch, not a mean thing about him.

You ended up getting pretty close to your horse.

I loved droving cattle and later I did quite a bit for A E Walker (auctioneer). He lived at Bangalow and had some farms near us. I would take cattle up to about fifty at a time to a tick gate at Billinudgel and another drover would take them on to Bangalow.

On one occasion I drove them right through putting them in a paddock at Mullumbimby for the night. We, I had Tom Rundle with me this time, camped at the pub.

We got the cattle on the road before six in the morning, without breakfast. I said to Tom "there's a little shop at Tyagarah. We'll get a feed there". The shop turned out to be only a post office. In the end we had our breakfast at Bangalow at four pm. After staying the night we rode home next day.

Instead of paying me for the job he gave me a pony. He had bought it for his son but it was a mad-headed thing always wanting to bolt, but it was a very nice animal.

I tried different types of bit but the only thing that would steady him was a running rein. You put the rein through the ring of the bit and fastened it to the head stall. When you pulled it worked like a block and tackle. He was always very lively. I have ridden him into Murwillumbah to a Light Horse Parade and back twenty miles each way and he would stand on his hind legs when I was trying to open the gate. His name was Tony and he was a light bay.

I later swapped him for a bigger horse, a chestnut, also named Tony. He was by far the best horse I ever owned if you could ride. When you got on him in the morning he always liked to pigroot across the yard and then he was happy for the rest of the day. You could ride him all day and he would still be full of life.

Donaldson's 1878 Plan for Murwillumbah

Greg Wightman continues his investigation into the early town plan history of Murwillumbah.

The last issue of Timelines included the first plan for the township of Murwillumbah, drawn up by surveyor Richard Barling in 1872. That plan was rejected in 1875 as unworkable by the District Surveyor at Grafton, P R Donaldson, and for several years the prospects for a town at Murwillumbah seemed dim. But in 1878 Donaldson had a change of heart (for reasons unknown) and presented his own plan, which is illustrated here. This plan is important for several reasons. Firstly, it was the first plan to make some allowance for the reserve's difficult topography; secondly, despite the latter the plan confirmed the viability of a township on the reserve; thirdly, the plan inaugurated several key streets that survive to the present day, including the town's main street; and finally, the plan shows for the first time the positions of the only buildings that existed on the village reserve in the 1870s, namely a courthouse and public school. Donaldson's plan was accepted, and the village of Murwillumbah was notified in March 1879.

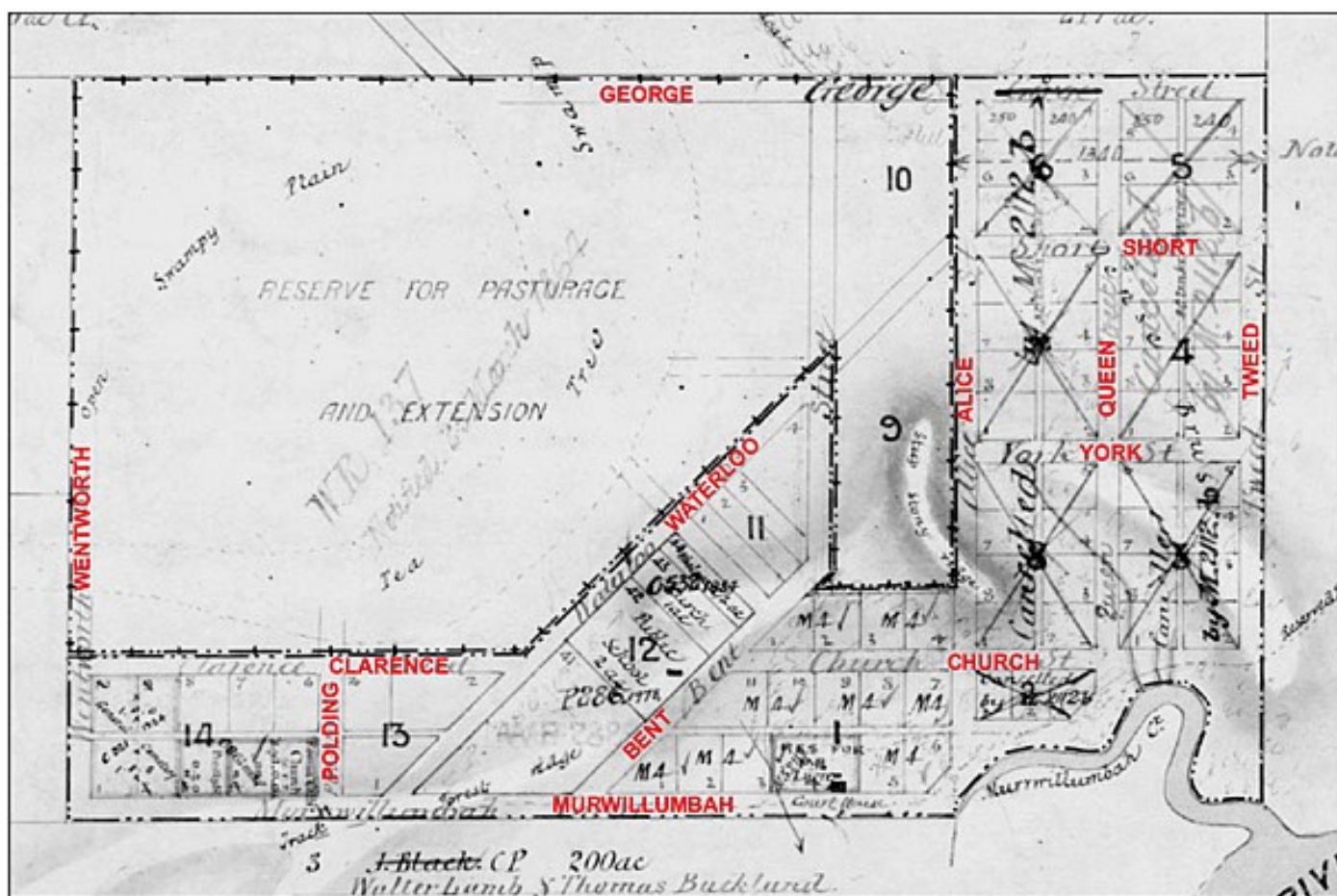
Donaldson wisely excluded most of the swampland (nowadays the Showground and St Patrick's sports fields) from residential settlement, though he left open the possibility of future expansion there. The residential area was to be confined to an L-shaped strip along the eastern and southern sides of the reserve. This emulated the grid plan proposed by Barling, albeit with

different street positions. Some of Donaldson's street names are still in use: Murwillumbah St on the south, George St on the north, Wentworth St on the west (only its southern end was formed); on the east side, Barling's Tweed St remained the same. Donaldson's Church and York Sts are also still with us, though only the southern part of the latter is in its original position; his Queen St is reflected in the line of today's Peter St (the stretch of today's Queen St near Broadway was added later). His Clarence and Polding Sts survived to the end of the 19th century; the latter was renamed Mooball St and was extended northeast to join with George St.

Donaldson included, for the first time, two parallel streets — Bent and Waterloo — running obliquely to the grid plan of streets. These two streets were tailored more to the topography of the steep hill, the summit of which was best accessed from the southwest side. A close look at Barling's plan (see previous issue of Timelines) shows in this area a surveyed track from James Black's farm up the ridge to the summit of the hill. Barling did not give the track a name (simply referring to it as "forest ridge") or definite outline, which suggests he didn't see it as part of his scheme for the township (indeed his grid-plan of streets crosses over the

track). One may note that both Barling's and Donaldson's plans show this track continuing southwest beyond the reserve, across James Black's farm. The track's position there matches that of the northern end of today's Byangum Rd. The latter was officially notified in 1881, and reflected an extension of the Nightcap Rd from Byangum to Murwillumbah (as discussed by this author in a previous issue of Timelines). Clearly, though, there was a track here already in the early 1870s, though it can't be much earlier because it does not appear on local land survey maps of the later 1860s. The course of the northern end of this track was formalised and regularised by Donaldson as his "Bent St". To that extent, one can say that Bent St, in its original form, represents the oldest thoroughfare of the Murwillumbah township (Barling's Tweed St, though just as old, was not formed or used until after 1878).

There appears to have been no residential settlement on the Murwillumbah village reserve in the 1870s. A small slab hut was used by James Bray as a courthouse as early as 1869, though its location remains unclear, with some situating it on the reserve hill, and others situating it down near the river not far from Murwillumbah Ck. This



Plan of village of Murwillumbah created by P. R. Donaldson and submitted in 1878 (NSW State Archives, Surveyor General's Crown Plans 1792–1886, Index NRS 13859, Sg Map M.2122a, Item No. 4337, 8 June 1878). Note: This image has been cropped by the author from the original digital copy, and street names have been added in red by the author for clarity.

temporary building (it was in fact referred to at the time as the 'Temporary Court House') was replaced in 1876/77 by a brick courthouse, situated on a low knoll on the north side of Murwillumbah Street. This is the one shown on Donaldson's plan. The small structure shown behind it might have been a watch house. Another building, long and narrow, is shown further uphill; its function is unclear, possibly a coach house and stables. This courthouse, with renovations and extensions, survived till the great fire of 1907.

Also shown on the Donaldson plan is the first public school at Murwillumbah, on the west side of Bent St opposite Church St (Lot 42, 2 ac, on land that is now 13 Bent St). This school predates Donaldson's plan, having been erected in 1873, thus accounting for its absence from Barling's plan of the previous year. By 1878 the school had 35 pupils. The school had two rooms with attached accommodation for a teacher. Prior to 1878, the school must have been accessed via the track up the ridge described above. From 1878 onwards, it was approached via that track's replacement, Bent St. Interestingly, the orientation of the block of land reserved for the school in 1873 did not conform to Barling's street grid of 1872, but to Donaldson's plan of Bent and Waterloo Sts of 1878. This observation reinforces the view that, even in 1872, it was the existence of a track up to the summit running obliquely to Barling's grid plan that would determine the layout of lots in this area, not Barling's street plan (curiously, Donaldson's plan shows the school house orientated E/W rather than, as one might expect, obliquely and parallel to Bent St).

Next to the school, on Donaldson's plan, is land that was set aside in December 1877 for a Methodist church and manse (Portions 43, 44), though nothing was built there and the Methodist church was eventually built in 1895 at the corner of Nullum St and Byangum Rd. In the southwest corner of the village reserve, Donaldson's plan shows land set aside for a General Cemetery. It extended down the hill to Donaldson's Clarence St. Next to the cemetery, Donaldson's plan shows land set aside for a Catholic church and Presbytery, bounded today by Murwillumbah, Mooball and Banner Sts, and

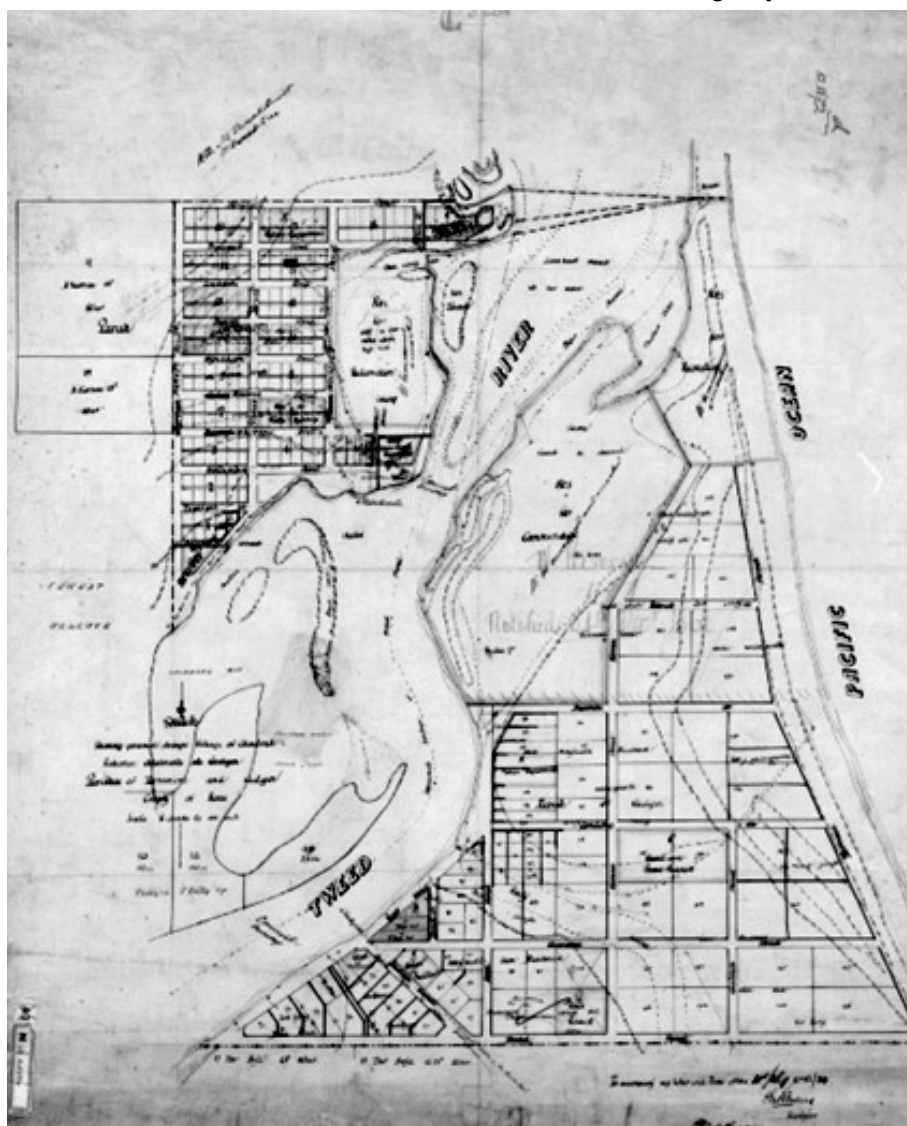
Banner Ln. Plans changed, and in 1896 the Catholic church was established on elevated land east of Donaldson's Polding St (= Mooball St).

The Barney of Barney's Point

Thanks to our Society researchers Joan Cuthel and Maris Bruzgulis for this interesting piece of historical research which arose due to an enquiry from the public.

The Society's Research Team has been asked who the Barney of Barney's Point was.

In *Place Names of the Tweed, Brunswick and Upper Richmond Regions* of 1984, Barney Kearney selected land near the point. The Society's investigations would now favour the name Bernard Kiernan. This name is recorded as the owner of two blocks of land adjacent to the surveyed village of Chinderah on a plan dated 1882. It also appears on a 'Village of Chinderah' map and the 'Parish of Terranora' maps available on the New South Wales Land Registry Services



Sketch showing approved design for the Village of Chinderah, County of Rous (NSW State Archives)

Historical Land Records Viewer. The earliest map has the surveyor naming two roads Kiernan and Bernard (or perhaps Barney), before crossing these out and renaming them Parkes and Whitton Streets respectively.

To identify a name does not provide the life history of the person who carried it. According to the 1984 place name entry, Barney Kearney built a wharf and a road to the river, though it does not specify when this happened. Norman Hewitt, writing in 1940, said that when 'the Tooloom diggings broke out [in the 1850s], a grog shanty was opened at the foot of the range by Barney Carney, who later gave the name to Barney's Point Tweed River, where he had a pub at Terranora'. He also relates in another article that year that Barney Carney and his twenty-eight bullocks had the task of moving the old customs house from where it was built to a drier site straddling the border. When he got bogged, Tom Boyd and another twenty-eight bullocks came to his aid. This happened in the 1870s, some years after the building of the customs house. The 1943 obituary of Esther Cecilia Sweetnam relates that when her family arrived 'at the Tweed, the travelers spent the night at Terranora, at the home of the late Bernard Cairns, known to all as "Barney Carney," who was the owner of the area now called Barney's Point'. This would have happened in the late 1860s.

What the Society can add to this information is that Bernard Kiernan, a sawyer usually resident on the Tweed River, married Mary Williams, a domestic servant living in Sussex Street, Sydney, in 1864. They were both born in Liverpool, England, and were aged thirty-three and twenty-eight respectively. In 1890 a man named Bernard Kiernan died in 1890 at the Liverpool Asylum (in Sydney, New South Wales). He was a fifty-seven-

year-old sailor who was born in Ireland, arriving in the colonies in 1858 on the "Tippo Sahib". It was not known if he had married or had children. Two other snippets from the newspapers at the time indicate that Bernard Kieran's conditional land purchases of 1870 and 1871 had lapsed 'through non-receipt of the necessary declarations', and that in 1886 these were to be auctioned 'unless the Warrant of Execution herein be previously satisfied'. These Bernard Kiernans are not definitively linked, and only the last is a certain link to the Bernard Kiernan of the Chinderah and Terranora maps described above. Such are the byways of history, veering between fact and fiction, on the highway of uncertainty.

Nevertheless, Barney Carney does exist, even if it is only for those who invoke his name when asked after whom Barney's Point is named. As the writer of the 2014 *Tweed Daily News* article 'Looking back: In search of Barney Carney' put it: 'The romantic tales of past times on the Tweed and the activities of the pioneers continue to tantalise the imagination of those who live here now.'

To preserve maximum space in Timelines for content, sources and references will not usually be listed. These are available upon request to:
editor@murwillumbahhistoricalsociety.org.au

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ABOUT THE SOCIETY: Formed on 16 March 1959, the Society's aim is to research, preserve and promote the rich and unique history of our town of Murwillumbah and its surrounds in the picturesque Tweed River Valley of far northern New South Wales. The Society operates out of our Research Centre in the Tweed Regional Museum's historic Murwillumbah facility. The Society is proudly supported by the Tweed Regional Museum, a community facility of Tweed Shire Council.

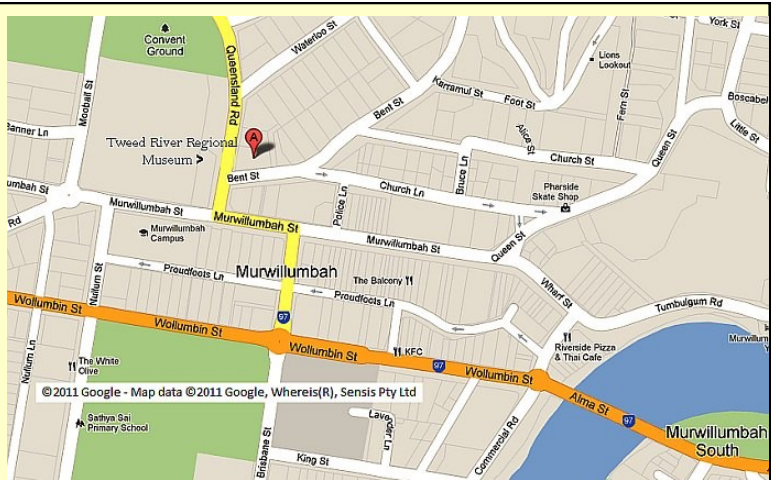
CONTACT US: Phone: (02) 6670 2273

Web: <http://www.murwillumbahhistoricalsociety.org.au/>

FB: <http://www.facebook.com/murwillumbahhistory>

Email: editor@murwillumbahhistoricalsociety.org.au

Mail: C/- Tweed Regional Museum, 2 Queensland Rd, Murwillumbah NSW 2484 or PO Box 373, Murwillumbah NSW 2484



ABOUT THE MUSEUM: The Tweed Regional Museum is a Tweed Shire Council community facility, established in 2004, with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Tweed Shire Council and the Murwillumbah, Tweed Heads and Uki and South Arm Historical Societies. It is one museum that operates across three branch locations; Murwillumbah, Tweed Heads and Uki, and in association with these three local Historical Societies. The three locations connect the Tweed Shire from the coast to the mountains, providing a unique journey into the history, people and places of the majestic Tweed Valley.

For information about the Tweed Regional Museum please visit: <http://museum.tweed.nsw.gov.au/> or phone on (02) 6670 2493.