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# “Bunk”

“History is more or less bunk”-  
HENRY FORD, Chicago Tribune, 1916

## SPECIAL EDITION

**To allow members of the Historical Society to keep in touch while it is not possible to hold meetings, the committee has decided to publish additional editions of BUNK.**

**Some of the articles will be about people and events outside the scope of life in Hunters Hill. We hope you enjoy them.**

The year 2019 marked the centenary of the devastating pneumonic influenza pandemic which swept the world. WHO (World Health Organisation) described the pandemic as ‘a global epidemic caused by a new influenza virus to which there is little or no pre-existing immunity in the human population’. It differed from seasonal influenza in that infections and deaths occur not only in the elderly and very young but also among previously healthy young adults.

The pandemic, also known as the ‘Spanish Flu’, began in 1918. It is estimated that it infected approximately a quarter of the world’s population, killing between 50 and 100 million people.

The first wave of the disease was relatively mild but the second wave was deadly and was transmitted around the world. The spread of the disease was caused largely by troops returning home from active service in Europe at the end of World War I.

Australian health authorities took precautionary measures in late 1918: they checked and quarantined ships, passengers and crew, and developed a vaccine and introduced free inoculation. The first reported case of pneumonic influenza in Australia was in Sydney in

late January 1919. Strategies were then put into place to contain the outbreak, including:

: **Gathering in public places, including schools, theatres, racecourses, churches and hotels was restricted.**

**Movement by public transport was restricted.**

**People had to wear masks in public.**

**Inoculation was provided at special depots such as in town halls and public schools.**

**Special emergency hospitals were established.**

**States brought in border closures and quarantine**

Between January and September 1919, pneumonic influenza killed 6387 people in NSW, infecting as many as 290,000 in Sydney alone.

most remembered ‘white masks ... worried parents and long funeral processions’. One of the oral histories recorded by Curby was that of Joe Ekerick. He was eight years old at the time of the pandemic and a member of a family who regularly attended St Charles’ Catholic Church in Ryde: ‘Oh yes, I remember it. We used all to have to wear masks. And you’d go to Mass on the Sunday in the open air. You couldn’t go to church... They held Mass in the school yard. I don’t know whether they closed the school down for a week or so, but it seems that they might have done, or for a few days or something, but I know I had to go to school in a mask and all that.’

Other interviewees made comments about the lack of a local emergency hospital, the poor condition of local roads and the lack of convenient public transport.

Curby reports that during the pandemic 20 deaths were recorded in the Municipality of Ryde and 11 in the Municipality of Eastwood, most of which occurred during May, June and July. This was not a high mortality rate compared with other local government areas.

After the pandemic was over, Denistone House reverted to its role as a convalescent home for men. However, after years of fundraising and lobbying of politicians, the Ryde District Soldiers’ Memorial Hospital finally opened in 1934 in a new hospital complex with Denistone House used as a nurses’ home.

**Originally published in the *Ryde Recorder* 1 June 2019. Reproduced with the permission of Ryde District Historical Society Inc. (Helen Patterson) Picture: Medical workers and staff at the Devonshire St depot, April 1919.**



The overall death toll across Australia was approximately 15,000 people, or 0.2% of the population, which was much lower than many other countries such as New Zealand. Very few towns or suburbs were spared and this included the district of Ryde, represented by the then municipalities of Ryde and Eastwood.

In 1997 Ryde Council commissioned oral historian Pauline Curby to undertake the recording of interviews with longstanding local residents to capture their memories of Ryde. Many of these oral histories mentioned the flu epidemic (sometimes incorrectly referred to as ‘bubonic plague’) and, combined with further research by Curby, the result was the publication in 1998 of a book entitled *Memories of the 1919 Influenza Pandemic*. The interviewees were children in 1919 and

## The Field of Mars plays an important part in the history of Hunters Hill.

It came into existence in 1792 when Governor Phillip granted parcels of land to a number of marines in an area now known as Ermington and Melrose Park. Its name originated from Mars, the Roman God of War, a reference to the marines serving in the colony. As more people moved into the area and established farms to raise livestock and grow produce to service the fledgling town of Sydney, they demanded more land upon which to graze their stock.

In 1804, Governor King responded by gazetting 2000 hectares of land, stretching from Hunters Hill to Pennant Hills, to be used for common grazing by local settlers. It was to be called the Field of Mars Common.

But, by the mid-1800s, the common was no longer being exclusively used for its original purpose. It had become mainly a wasteland inhabited by unauthorised dwellers and disreputable characters as well as being used for illicit purposes, such as making sly grog.

As the population continued to grow, there was increasing demand for better links to the city. Instead

## Field of Mars dates back to Governor Phillip

of just travelling by boat along the Parramatta River, there was a need for a direct land route which required bridges. By 1874, a NSW Parliamentary Select Committee proposal to sell off much of the Field of Mars Common was

for public usage; 56 hectares were retained as the Field of Mars Reserve and another adjacent parcel became the Field of Mars Cemetery.

The reserve was gazetted as a wildlife refuge in 1979 because of its wide variety of native flora and fauna. It is estimated it contains around 300 specimens of plants and even more types of animals and birds. The cemetery, now 17 hectares, contains some



agreed upon. The money raised was used to finance building the old Iron Cove and Gladesville bridges.

New suburbs were established in the late 1800s and early 1900s, such as East Ryde. Market gardens sprang up, supplying produce to Sydney. A remnant of the common was preserved

44,000 graves with many mausoleums or burial chambers. One notable interment is that of opera singer Rita Hunter, (1933-2001).

*Chris Schofield*

*Picture: Thanks Governor Phillip. The area is popular with school groups.*

## The Wallace Power Boat Company

The Wallace Power Boat Company leased land at Clarkes Point from the Mort's Dock and Engineering Company in late 1917 in anticipation of securing a lucrative contract from the Commonwealth Government for sailing ships to assist in the war effort. The order came through and the shipyard immediately commenced building six large barquentines, made of timber because steel was in short supply.

Each four-masted barque would be 250 ft long with 44 ft beam and 24 ft draught. They would be constructed from Australian hardwood with other Australian timbers for internal fittings and have auxiliary diesel engines developing 240 horsepower and giving a speed of six knots.

Amid pomp and ceremony, the first vessel was commenced in July 1918. At the laying of the keel, the assistant treasurer, J.C.L. Fitzpatrick said, "To Hell with the Kaiser", which was painted on the keel.

As an incentive, the Commonwealth Government offered a bonus of 2000 pounds sterling per month for every vessel delivered within the

prescribed time. The firm then pledged to distribute the extra money among the 300-strong workforce as an encouragement to complete the work quickly.

However, with the Armistice in November 1918, the government no longer needed the vessels, and in January 1919 the contract was cancelled.

With peace restored, steel for ship building was becoming available again; the company and the government came to an agreement for compensation for work already done.

The company tried to attract private buyers for the partially completed vessels. However, they were unsuccessful and were also unable to attract work building wooden ships, as such craft had had their day.

The Mort's Dock and Engineering Company went to the Equity Court in 1922 to seek the winding up of the firm because it was unable to pay the rent on its land. So, after just five years at Clarkes Point, the Wallace Power Boat Company was no more.

*Chris Schofield*

## The 1919 Flu Inoculation

Every inoculation depot yesterday was thronged. Thousands of persons passed through the hands of the doctors, but thousands, after one look at the long queues waiting outside the buildings, turned away disappointed. The great majority of those awaiting attention in the suburban depots were women and children; but in the city there was a larger proportion of men. The crowds were perfectly orderly, and did not require the attention of the police, who were present to maintain the queues

and suppress unruly spirits. The depots, which were open in the evening, were again thronged. All private practitioners were also kept busy yesterday. They attended to numerous calls from factories and shops, where employees were "done" en masse. Employers recognise that, if the epidemic really gets loose, the inoculation of staffs will prove a wise precaution.

*The Sydney Morning Herald 29 January 1919*

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