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## St Kilda Sea Baths, Jacka Boulevard, St Kilda

### Earlier Baths

After the 1850s, sea bathing became acceptable, as long as it was within large timber structures that protected bathers from predatory marine life, but even more to protect from the popular gaze. Women were protected from the sight of men bathing, because men frequently bathed naked. Sea bathing became popular as a health tonic.

Throughout the nineteenth century, there were as many as six different sea baths operating along the St Kilda shore. At one time, there were as many as twelve baths between South Melbourne and St Kilda, including: the Railway Baths, Ladies' Baths, Tramway Baths, Hot Sea Baths, Middle Park Baths, Kenny's Ship Baths, Hegarty's Gents' and Hegarty's Ladies, Smith's Baths and the Royal (or Ford's) Baths. St Kilda's reputation for therapeutic sea air, ozone and 'a dip in the briny' was well deserved.

Prohibition of Sunday bathing was first challenged in 1912: by the Open Sea Bathers' League whose members dared to enter the water and yet were not arrested. But St Kilda Council's byelaw was not revoked until 1922, by which time thousands of bathers even prim Methodists, had broken it.

A special return rail fare from Melbourne included the price of bathing and rental of bathing dress and towel. John Hegarty of 'Hegarty's Railway Baths, St Kilda - For Gentlemen' advertised to the 'lady bathers of Melbourne and Suburbs.' In 1854, Captain Kenney bought the *Nancy*, one of many ships abandoned by crews who deserted them for the goldfields. It was beached and scuttled south of St Kilda Pier. He ran a line to shore to guide bathers out to the ship, which was propelled by dinghy and he and his family lived aboard. He also operated ladies' baths at St Kilda, advertised as under the 'personal superintendence of Mrs Kenney and the Misses Kenney', with swimming tuition by Miss Elphinstone Dick.

Miss Elphinstone Dick had achieved fame as a champion 'lady swimmer' at the baths in the 1870s and later ran a gymnasium for women in the city. She lived in St Kilda with her partner Miss Alice Moon, although the pair also owned a farm in the bush at Clayton, from which they rigorously excluded all male animals.

An 1856 select committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria recommended the establishment of a Sea Bathing Company at St Kilda and of two bathing houses. Construction commenced in 1858 and the baths at 'sparkling St Kilda by the sea' opened in 1860. They included a gymnasium, refreshment rooms, a residence, offices and a 234 x 61 m swimming enclosure. Bathers formed a club, the 'Companions of the Baths' and Sir Zelman Cowen (b1919, 20) was a member.

Eventually, there were at least four separate bathing enclosures at St Kilda. The last, in 1903, was the most exotic, with domical clusters overhead and hot sea baths, but alas, it was all destroyed by fire in 1926, the same year that fire destroyed the Palais Pictures (3). The fifth baths was the Kenney bathing ship, which survived until 1912.

In 1917, open sea bathing was legalized and within a decade, the sexes were mingling quite freely in the water. Extension of the tramline 'to the very doors of the bathing establishments' in 1925 increased their popularity, but after dark, gaslight made 'the blackness of the water more apparent and repulsive.' By 1925, bathing in sea-baths had become less popular, as bathers braved the open sea.



St Kilda Baths c1915, destroyed by fire in 1926

### **New Baths**

So in 1928 the council erected three open-sea pavilions [changing sheds] leased to private operators: at Beaconsfield Parade, at 40 Jacka Boulevard (surviving as Donovans' Restaurant) and at the Ormond Esplanade, Elwood, which were demolished 1971. In 1928, the Council also replaced the sea baths enclosure on the same site, spacious and solid in fireproof reinforced concrete. In anticipation of its expected popularity, 756 lockers were provided for men and 572 for women. The only comparable structures in Victoria were smaller: the Brighton Baths (1936), the Williamstown Pavilion (1936) and the Eastern Beach Baths at Geelong (1937).

The women's section had Islamic fretwork screens and Moorish domical towers, which echo the pairs of domical towers at the Palais, at Luna Park, Belvedere (10) and elsewhere in St Kilda. The men's section had arcades facing the shore, with wavy Spanish Mission parapets and decoration. These new baths had architectural pretension, even style: the council's design revealed taste and skill rare in contemporary municipally designed edifices. It brought a tang of California to St Kilda and set the stylistic tone for later developments. Yet it appears no architect was involved: it was designed in 1929 by the City Engineer's Department of St Kilda Council, when the City Building Surveyor was Richard Terence who only held a certificate in engineering, but clearly had flair.

The Sea Baths site remained Crown Land, leased to the Council, who sublet to an operator F C Carroll, who sub-sublet various ancillary functions. They opened in 1931, on the brink of the Great Depression, but even then, the concept of enclosed sea baths was outmoded and the baths were never as successful as envisaged and the beach pavilions were more popular.

Standards of acceptable decency and dress at the baths were vigorously debated. In 1938 mixed bathing of both sexes, legal since 1927, was restricted to weekends and then only in the ladies' section. However, during World War II (1939-45) more relaxed moral standards allowed nude sunbathing.

1945 was also the moment when Sidney Nolan (1917-92, 1, 4, 8, 9, 20 & 34) was living in St Kilda and painting the beach. It is depicted in works such as *Bathers*, of which there are three known versions (1942-45); *St Kilda* (1945); *St Kilda, the Sea Baths* and *Under the Pier* (1945) in which several figures appear to



Nude bathers in Men's Section, c1945

be sunbathing nude. In summer months the boy Sid would sun-bake naked in the men's section, the fierce sun reflected off the corrugated iron enclosure.

Also in 1945, a 33-year-old Australian Army sergeant died whilst swimming in the baths after being stabbed in the heart by the barb of a stingray, causing a 76 mm gash. These were extremely rare, yet remarkably similar circumstances to the death over sixty years later of animal adventurer Steve Irwin in Queensland on 4 September 2006.



St Kilda Sea Baths from Jacka Boulevard, 1950

The baths building deteriorated due to lack of maintenance and by 1950, the timber wing walls which stretched west out to the sea were considered unsafe and were closed and the council's lease of the Sea Baths site expired in 1953. In 1955, the government signed a new lease with South Pacific Holdings, who demolished the deteriorated men's baths and the decorative parapets and closed the toilets, but repaired the women's section.

A sequence of nightclubs, of various levels of seediness, was operated in the former domed café, including Leonards named for the family who co-managed the place with F C Carroll. In the 1970s one of the most infamous of these clubs was Bojangles (16), notorious later for its violence and several deaths. In 1981, the Sea Baths' concrete wings were demolished and by the mid-1980s, the nightclub had closed, the former café was the victim of fires and vandalism and the only operative lease was for the hot Sea Baths, which was surrounded by derelict structure. In about 1970 the adjacent St Kilda Pier was rebuilt, but redevelopment of the Sea Baths was not discussed until 1989 and in late 1991, the Kirner Victorian government sought redevelopment proposals for the site.

Hannah Friedman of Zarawaters was selected as the preferred developer of the proposed cafés, function room, health club and pool and in 1993 the Sea Baths closed. The planning process absorbed another three years, and in May 1995 construction commenced by demolition of the entire building, except for its two towers with their copper domes.

Zarawaters was prosecuted in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal for illegal building works, which were then required to be demolished. In 1997 the contractors, Fletcher Construction took legal action against Zarawaters and work stopped again. In April, a petition with 500 signatures demanded that the new building was too large and be demolished. The Premier, Jeff Kennett and Mayor Dick Gross both supported demolition.



St Kilda Sea Baths, 2002

Later in the year, Castlepines of Sydney applied to take over the lease, but this did not proceed. In 1998, Zarawaters appointed new directors and changed its name to St Kilda Sea Baths Pty Ltd, but by October, receivers had been appointed. At the end of the year, Dr Henry and Jannie Tay of Singapore bought the lease, renamed the project South Pacific St Kilda and a 460-space, three-level car park was added to the project at an additional \$15 million cost. In early 2000, construction of the car park began and a new design received planning approval.

A year later the Deputy Premier John Thwaites officially opened the \$55 million, 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> pool complex, but without the pool. Hepburn Spa Resort was engaged to operate the complex and since then the various components have been incrementally opened, finally in October 2001 including the pool.

In 2004-08 Site Office, Landscape Architects with Jackson Clements Burrows redesigned 700 metres of the boardwalk promenade along the St Kilda foreshore from St Kilda Pier down to Brookes Jetty, costing \$8 million. Resulting from a limited design competition, the design involved widening the boardwalk to 14 metres and topographic articulation to encourage a greater range of uses, with fountains, trees, beach showers, a skate-park and seawall, to link the beach with the bars, shops and restaurants of Fitzroy Street, and extending the West Pavilion as a 300-seat restaurant.

What the Foreshore, the Baths, the Triangle Site and the Palais really need is more direct pedestrian access to Fitzroy Street, by under-grounding Jacka Boulevard from Mary Street to Shakespeare Grove.

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