

Oatley Flora and Fauna Conservation Society Presidential Address 2018

First I would like to thank the outgoing committee, most of whom I believe are standing for re-election. OFF could not function without a hard working and productive committee.

Shaun Keays-Byrne is one who will not be standing for the committee this year and will also be resigning from the position of Newsletter editor. I would like to thank Shaun for the great work he has done on the Newsletter, meeting posters and calendar this year as well our banners. He will be missed both as editor and from the committee.

I would like to thank Sue Howard who, along with Vicki Bolling, organised the annual dinner.

Thanks also to the Hospitality and Welcome group: Val Douglas, Bev Watters, Sue de Beuzeville and Vicki Bolling.

As you have heard from Liz, we had a very good 63rd year, with many activities, and I would like to thank those who led our field days and helped out at our various stalls.

I would like to make special mention of the OFF Research fund sub-committee, Rodger, Matt and Graham Fry, who researched how to choose our grant recipients for this year, Rheannon Honey and Ross Crates. I am sure you will remember Rheannon's enthusiastic presentation last year. She and Ross will be reporting back to us at our November meeting. Meanwhile we will begin another round of grants, which you are funding through contributions to the President's fund.

This year I would like to tell you about an inspirational community campaigner from the Botany area of Sydney ; Nancy Hillier OAM.

In 2016 a number of us were invited to a lecture in her honour. This lecture was presented by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from the University of NSW. It is intended to be an annual lecture to commemorate the life and work of Nancy and was given again this year at NSW Parliament House, with the involvement of Botany Bay community organisations and here family.

I thought it worthwhile to share her story as she was a truly outstanding campaigner for her local community.

Nancy's many contributions to the development of services, to championing the interests of residents, and to protection of the environment in the Botany

Bay region were well known in the area. Her legacy is aptly summed up the title of her Sydney Morning Herald obituary as the "Relentless rebel with many causes".

In 1976, when the NSW government proposed to turn Botany Bay into a deep-water port with a coal loader, Nancy Hillier led a campaign against it. Leading the Botany Bay Independent Action Group, she collected 1400 signatures on a petition to prevent what she saw as a degradation of the region. Although her cause was winning popular support, Hillier was taking on powerful interests and they hit back.

She was told if she went out of her home into the street, she would be shot. Her house was broken into twice. She was "absolutely terrorised", she said, but she stood by her principles. "We have a right to complain about improper planning," she said. "A country's wealth must be assessed by the living conditions of its people and not be judged by how many millionaires it can boast." The campaign succeeded in stopping the coal loader. While other development did go ahead, Botany got Sir Joseph Banks Park.

In 1983, when the NSW government made moves to amalgamate Botany with Sydney City Council, Botany residents protested. There were rallies, songs and banners, and the campaign succeeded. "The people should take whatever action is necessary to make the government understand this proposal is totally wrong," Hillier said.

There was much to campaign about in Botany, including groundwater contamination by heavy industry and an extension of Sydney Airport.

Hillier, famously referred to as "the ratbag of Botany", could be a formidable force.

Annie (known as Nancy) Patrick was born in Waverton on June 16, 1924, the daughter of Scottish migrants. Her father William had come to work on construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge but died when Nancy was eight and she and her three siblings, were brought up by her mother during the Depression.

The family moved to Matraville and Botany Bay. "It was a mixture of country and sea," Nancy said in an interview. "It was a child's paradise. There was a beach where children could go to swim, with no fear of drowning. You would see the cows being driven home in the afternoon and vegetable gardens were widespread. It was a treat to take our vegetables from the Chinamen."

Nancy began work at age 14 at Australian Paper Mills at Matraville, sorting paper for recycling into cardboard. She also took up her first issue. One of Nancy's work companions said workers were not allowed to take toilet breaks in work time. Nancy thought this was wrong, and she told her fellow employees during their break that they should take off their underpants and wash them in the hand basin. She then took the wet garments and hung them on a line at the bottom of the stairs leading to the boss's office. Naturally, the boss took offence, but Nancy said if employees were allowed to go to the toilet when they felt the urge, they would not wet themselves. Problem solved.

At 17, she moved to Botany. In 1944, she married haulage contractor Ernest Hillier. They had two children and after bringing them up, Nancy Hillier became aware of the march of industry across the suburb, with what she saw as "total disregard for the people".

In the early 1970s, her enjoyment of Christmas dinner was ruined by vapours wafting into the house from the ICI-Orica plant. "It seeped into everything," she said. "Even the pudding tasted of chlorine. My son had a massive asthma attack. I said, 'I've had enough of Orica!'"

She began writing letters to the council. The problem with industrial contamination was that some elements were linked with cancer. When construction work began on Port Botany, she, Ernest and two neighbours formed the nucleus of an opposition.

Hillier's leadership and commitment to the environment did not go unnoticed by government, even if her direct action grated. In 1985, Hillier was named as Botany Council's citizen of the year. She worked tirelessly in her community, often challenging industry and governments. A natural organiser she always led from the front.

In 1989 she led a protest group against the construction of a third runway at Sydney Airport. The *Herald* said of her then: "In 20 years of fighting industrial developments in the Botany area, Nancy Hillier has been mocked and threatened with death, met prime ministers and blocked bulldozers. She has seen more defeats than victories, but remains committed to the principle that people matter."

Hillier was given many public roles, including a place on the Botany community consultation committee, the Botany industrial park environmental committee, the Port Botany expansion committee, the senior citizens' advisory committee and the emergency management planning committee. In 2006, she was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia.

Still she did not sit back. In August, 2012, the 88-year-old called on residents to fight and stop the state government's plan to remove the container cap at Port Botany. She did not win that fight, but she would never be silenced.

"A lot of people don't want to complain because they don't want the name of a whinger. It doesn't bother me ... it would bother me if I didn't speak up," she said.

Nancy was also tireless in assisting academics and students, many from UNSW in their research and teaching projects. She also co-authored academic analysis and wrote many reports, submissions, letters and other public documents.

Nancy died in 2013 (1st September) , aged 89.

I am sure you will agree that Nancy was an inspiration to us all. She tackled bigger problems than we will probably ever have in our area. She was not always successful, but did not give up.

We should remember her when we fight our local battles to save the environment.

One of those issues that we must remain vigilant on is tree cover in our area. We must ensure that the council's announced tree canopy policy is a sound one and implemented properly, particularly when it comes to developments which are denuding our area.

Thank you.



**LET'S TAKE THE
FIGHT TO THE
STREETS**