

Oatley Flora and Fauna Conservation Society Presidential Address 2019

My address this year will be shorter as I want to leave sufficient time for a special presentation later in the meeting on our Oatley Park Castle project.

I will start by thanking the outgoing committee, most of whom I believe are standing for re-election. OFF could not function without your hard working productive and stimulating committee. I would like to give a particular thanks to Melina who is resigning from the committee after a long stint. She will continue as web site editor but would like to relinquish that too when she can, so we are looking for a replacement. Please let us know if you are interested in this important position.

A great thanks too to our Newsletter team including our new editor, Adelina Cubelic. Despite being busy with a young family, Lina finds time to attend our editorial meetings and put together the Newsletter in a timely and creative way.

I would like to thank Sue Howard and Vicki Bolling for organising another successful annual dinner. I am sure all those who attended had an enjoyable evening.

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

And thanks those who led our field days and helped out at our various stalls, planting days, etc, helping to make our 64th year another great one as outlined by our diligent Secretary, Liz Cameron. A society like ours could not function without people like Liz who devote much time to their organisations. Thanks Liz.

Another group I would like to mention is the OFF Research fund sub-committee, Rodger, Matt and Graham Fry, who researched and chose this year's grant recipients, funded by contributions to the President's fund.

This year I just want to touch briefly on OFF's past. Long-standing member Alan Fairley has been documenting OFF's history and I was recently reading *Being Green* and as it occurred to me that it may be timely to remind members of the great things that OFF has been involved in and contributed to over the years and the battles that our predecessors have fought. **I am indebted to Alan for the following information.**

As you know, Rafe and Moira Kowron, with a few others, started OFF in 1955, when they became concerned about the wanton destruction and

vandalism that was taking place in the natural bushland surrounding their new home. From little things do big things grow, or in OFF's case a long-standing, and dare I say, successful, grass-roots environmental organisation.

Over the years, OFF grew along with Oatley, which changed, not always for the better when it came to the natural environment. But, without OFF, I am sure it would have been much worse, as its members have fought to retain and improve their local environment.

Just a few of these battles:

Proposal for an "all-tide" swimming pool at Oatley Baths (1960s)

Road across Lime Kiln Bay from the Park to Peakhurst (1960s)

Dumping of rubbish in Lime Kiln Bay to create sports fields, extend the golf course and extend a road to Peakhurst. (1960s)

Second oval in Oatley Park. Vandalism, speeding cars, the need for more rangers and closing the park at night also received attention. (1966-67)

Huge marina off Jewfish Point projecting 76 metres into the Georges River, including parking in Oatley park. (1968)

Disposal of rubbish in the bays of the Georges River. Despite protests ("the battle of the bays") many bays were filled. Fortunately the eastern arm of Lime Kiln Bay survived intact. (1970s)

These battles resulted in the Lime Kiln Bay Preservation Society being formed as well as the Preserve Oatley West Resident Action Group (or POW) (1970s)

Bradley Method of bush regeneration was being established at this time and the committee members sought to introduce the method to Lime Kiln Bay. (late 1970s)

In 1970 high tension power lines with associated stanchions routed through Oatley Park was defeated

Application for a Commonwealth grant to build a swimming pool in park (1975).

Application for a helicopter pad on Oatley Park oval. Refused by Council. (1978)

Even though the threats to the environment increased in the 1980s there was Increasing Community Awareness in the 1980s, and locally, Councils began to respond to community concerns in a more positive manner.

In fact OFF had members on councils. Julian sheen was deputy mayor. One result was the Oatley Park Advisory Committee (OPAC), formed to oversee Oatley Park

Threats to the park still had to be resisted though. Excessive hazard reduction burning by Fire Brigade, leading eventually to a park fire policy.

Hutchison Telecom communications tower and facilities constructed on edge of park oval. Removed after court action by Hurstville Council. OFF members took part in the community protest.

Mountain bikes causing significant damage to park. Council Management Plan excludes mountain bikes at the request of OFF.

On the positive side in 1990s OFF obtained nearly \$400,000 to rehabilitate local bushland reserves at Yarran Road, Neverfail Bay, Riverwood Park, Poulton Park, Moore Reserve, Myles Dunphy Reserve, Shipwrights Bay and Oatley Pleasure Ground.

Time does not allow me to elaborate further, but you can see that our predecessors had plenty to protest about and fought well. Our battle for the Oatley Bowling Club site is just the latest and continuing fight.

Threats will always be there, as we can also see today with the increasing density of our suburb bringing with it the removal of many mature trees, as well as other threats. We need to remain vigilant and keep working to protect our precious environment, building on the legacy of past members.

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Thank you.

Graham

We must continue this battle to protect the environment carried out by them.

Oatley Park

In the 1960s the Society vigorously opposed two major threats to the environmental values of Oatley Park and fortunately neither went ahead. They were:

1. a proposal for an "all-tide" swimming pool at Oatley Baths and
2. a Council plan for a road across Lime Kiln Bay from the Park to Peakhurst which was to be the first stage of the infilling of Lime Kiln Bay to create sports fields.

Lime Kiln Bay

In 1964 it emerged that Hurstville Council planned to fill Lime Kiln Bay by dumping rubbish up to 9 metres deep to create sports fields and an extension of the nearby golf course as well as another road to Peakhurst. There were protests began from local residents and OFF.

In July 1969, a petition containing hundreds of signatures against the proposed filling was organised by Arnold Bryden, then Society Treasurer. By the end of the decade, the reclamation work had not begun but it was still under consideration. A new round of this fight was to begin in 1972 when Hurstville Council started to fill the northern arm of Lime Kiln Bay with garbage.

Oatley Park

In 1966-67, OFF protested to the Lands Department over proposals to build a second oval in the park. Issues such as vandalism, speeding cars, the need for more rangers and closing the park at night all received attention as well.

In 1968-69 there was a proposal to build a huge marina off Jewfish Point projecting 76 metres into the Georges River. As no parking was available near the marina, boat owners were to park their cars in Oatley Park and be ferried across to the marina by the proprietor. After numerous protests, Council later changed its opinion and opposed the proposal.

Battle for the Bays.

The 1970s saw major impacts on the bays along the Oatley section of the Georges River with the natural beauty and environmental values of these waterways and wooded foreshores altered forever by the short-sightedness of both Hurstville and Kogarah Councils. Lime Kiln Bay and the north-western arm of Oatley Bay (Moore Reserve) were seen by Councils as cheap and convenient areas for the disposal of rubbish and the north-eastern arm of Oatley Bay (Poulton Park) was partly covered in dredged silt.

Despite the protests of many groups, including OFF, the bays were eventually filled, flattened, grassed and converted to playing fields and a golf course. Only the eastern arm of Lime Kiln Bay survived intact, to become, ironically, a jewel in the crown for Hurstville. And in 2000 Council received a grant for a massive wetland rehabilitation project in the year 2000 at a cost of \$1.2 million.

As a result of these onslaughts the Lime Kiln Bay Preservation Committee was formed in 1973 to fight this threat and began to collect signatures from those opposing the reclamation of the eastern end of Lime Kiln Bay

In 17 August 1976 a public meeting of 70 residents formed the Preserve Oatley West Resident Action Group (or POW) and were supported by OFF.

After Hurstville Council (finally) decided not to proceed with the reclamation of Lime Kiln Bay in October 1976, the Lime Kiln Bay Preservation Committee transformed itself into the Lime Kiln Bay Preservation Society in 1977 and focused on the clean-up and the regeneration of the area. Just after this, the Bradley Method of bush regeneration was being established and the committee members sought to introduce the method to Lime Kiln Bay.

Poulton Park And Moore Reserve were other sites OFF worked to preserve in the 1970s.

Oatley Park

Then in 1970 high tension power lines with associated stanchions routed through Oatley Park was defeated and the lines were to be re-routed.

Increasing Community Awareness

The 1980s was a period of increasing threats to the environment but also increasing community awareness that action had to be taken to prevent further damage. Thus the decade saw the rise of many environmental action groups in both Australia and overseas. Locally, Councils began to respond to community concerns in a more positive manner, developing programs and policies to better protect the natural assets under their control.

Councils tentatively began a period of co-operation with organisations like OFF rather than being in direct conflict with them. Differences in priorities and attitudes still arose, but in both Hurstville and Kogarah Municipalities, this co-operation was facilitated by having OFF members as Aldermen on both Councils.

Relieved of the time-consuming local battles which marked the 1970s, the OFF committee could devote more time and money to supporting other environmental groups involved in bushland protection around Sydney and give moral support through letters, petitions and information about the issues to conservation groups throughout the rest of Australia and the world.

A practical example of Hurstville Council's more positive attitude was the establishment of the Oatley Park Advisory Committee (OPAC), formed to oversee Oatley Park. Julian Sheen, who was Deputy Mayor of Hurstville Council at the time, promoted the idea, discussed it with OFF and steered it through both the Labor caucus and Council.

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.

