

Life in Pre-War Ku-ring-gai

By Allan Rost

In 1891, one year after the opening of the St Leonards to Hornsby railway the population of Ku-ring-gai was still only 1,429. However, over the next decade it was one of the fastest growing areas of Sydney – 10% per annum compared with just 2.3% per annum over the metropolitan area. When the first Commonwealth census was taken in 1911, the count had risen to 9,458 and at the outbreak of World War I there would have been over 12,000 people living there. Nevertheless, the area remained sparsely populated with less than one person per acre.

Although the steam train journey to Sydney was a great improvement on Tom Watson's horse coach, it was not without its difficulties. Until 1903 the line ended at St Leonards from where a coach or the cable tram was taken to the ferry wharves at Milsons Point. By 1909 the railway was duplicated and had island platforms with Federation style brick buildings.

Despite these inconveniences, between 1890 and the outbreak of war:

... large houses, such as those in the eastern suburbs, Strathfield and Mosman, spread along the line, to create the longest continuous sector of middle-class settlement in Australia. Here doctors and stockbrokers, retailers and wholesalers, importers and exporters, and even the occasional teacher made their homes. The quintessentially middle-class nature of these suburbs could be seen in the clubs, churches, schools and political party branches that flourished along the line.¹

The upper north shore was favoured by professional and self-employed men to such an extent that between 1895 and 1903 they increased fourfold there. The electoral roll for 1903 discloses Turramurra as being the most favoured suburb with 82 of such residents.

Of the 20 male residents in Ku-ring-gai Avenue, 17 were professional or businessmen. Pymble was almost as popular.²

In 1911 Australia's population was over 95% Anglo-Celtic. The most apparent exception in Ku-ring-gai was the Chinese market gardeners of whom there were 79 at Federation.³ In 1914 Ah Chong's grocery store on the Pymble shopping strip was the social centre for his countrymen.⁴ One group of prominent citizens who were immediately affected by the outbreak of war were the European wool buyers. Most German nationals had departed when war appeared inevitable. It was mandatory that French and Belgian men return to help defend their homelands or be classed as deserters.

There were 18 churches in 1914. Ku-ring-gai was 'a Protestant stronghold, with higher than average numbers of Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists living there.'⁵

[Presbyterianism] became the dominant local religion, as many of the wealthy businessmen and comfortably off professional people who settled in the district were, like William Cowan, Scottish. Soon there were more Scottish Presbyterians on the upper north shore than anywhere else in New South Wales.⁶

Recruiting, Enlisting, Compulsory Training and Conscription in Ku-ring-gai

By Kath Rieth

Recruiting for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) began on 10 August 1914, six days after Britain declared war on Germany.¹ The very next day Percy Blakeman, a 26 year old plumber and gas fitter, and former Gordon Public School student enlisted in the special mixed force known as the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF). With 15 other men from Ku-ring-gai, Private Blakeman left Sydney on 19 August 1914 aboard the *Berrima* with the AN&MEF bound for New Guinea. The Force was instructed to seize and destroy the German wireless stations at New Britain.

Local response to the call to arms was rapid. By the end of September 1914 another five Ku-ring-gai men had left Sydney bound for the War in Europe and the Middle East, four on the *Southern* and one on the *Star of England*. On 18 October, 10 left on the *Suffolk*, 17 on the *Afric*, and three on the *Argyllshire*. Two left on 19 October, one each on the *Hororata* and the *Benalla*. On 20 October, 12 left on the *Star of Victoria*, 14 on the *Euripides*, and one each on the *Karoo*, *Ascanius*, *Hymettus* and *Orvieta*. All of these ships were to assemble in Albany, Western Australia as part of the first detachment of AIF and NZ forces. The 38-strong convoy of ships sailed out of Albany on 1 November 1914 to disembark the troops at Alexandria, Egypt on 3 December to undergo further training.

A vivid description of their departure was published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of 8 December 1914, written by AB 'Banjo' Paterson, 'The Herald's special commissioner with the Australian troops':



A vague, electric restlessness is in the air. What are those coming out of the inner harbour? Two grim, gliding leviathans, going majestically out to sea to take their places as guardians of the fleet. There is something uncanny in the absolute silence with which everything is done. They glide past the frowning cliffs, whose

feet are awash with the sea, through the long lines of waiting transports, and are soon lost to sight steaming right out into the eye of the sun. Then there is a stir at the stern, a gliding, oily rush of water, which tells us that the screw is turning at last. At least a thousand pairs of field glasses are centred on her anchor chain. Link by link it comes in-board and the leader of the fleet is under way. Noiselessly the great ship gathers speed and moves ahead through the waiting fleet; and, as she goes out the vessels that are to follow her in line get silently under way ... in line behind her ... Thirty thousand fighting men, representing Australasia, are under way for the great war ... It is the most wonderful sight that an Australian ever saw.

Recruitment
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The German New Guinea Campaign (The Australian Naval & Military Expeditionary Force)

By David Wilkins

With the commencement of hostilities in Europe followed by the British declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914, the immediate concern for Australia was the security of its shipping lanes and the threatening presence in the Pacific Ocean of the formidable German Squadron (under Admiral von Spee) with its potential to harass Australia's troop convoys as well as her trade routes. Of concern also were the powerful German wireless stations at Rabaul and other Pacific Islands that had direct communications with Berlin and could coordinate attacks on Australian shipping.



Troops of 1st Battalion AN&MEF at Cockatoo Island preparing to embark on the *Berrima* for German New Guinea, August 1914. Photograph Official History of Australia in the World War of 1914-18 Vol. X by SS Mackenzie, *The Australians at Rabaul* 5th edition, p.30.

Within little more than a week a small joint force was recruited from the hardiest of the initial volunteers to form the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF), conceived to capture German New Guinea including the Bismarck Archipelago, and to destroy the German radio network in the Pacific. It was also to occupy German controlled islands such as Nauru, the Caroline Islands, Solomon Islands, and the Marshall Islands. The force was commanded by a militia officer, Colonel William Holmes, and initially comprised an infantry battalion (1,023 men) from Sydney, a naval landing party of 500 and a small complement of the Australian Army Medical Corps, all voluntary troops. The troop-carrying converted P&O steamer, *Berrima*, departed Cockatoo Island in Port Jackson, Sydney on 19 August

1914 for German New Guinea, collecting her escorts from the Australian Squadron as she progressed north. It had taken a mere two weeks after Britain's declaration of war to recruit, select, organise, uniform, and arm these troops. They trained on their way, including at Palm Island, Queensland.

Just 18 officers and soldiers of this small force were from the suburbs of Ku-ring-gai: plumber and gasfitter Percival Blakeman, law clerk Charles Clayton, solicitor Clarence Collier, farmer William Fraser, dairyman John French, mechanic Gordon Hickey, orchardist Godfrey Jenkins, poultry farmer Edgar Keyte, hairdresser William King, labourer Philip Plumb, chemist Claud Roberts, land selector Harry Rogers, brothers Jack Wilmott from the optical trade and Stanley a commercial traveller, and