

SEVEN MILE BEACH, GERROA

Seven Mile Beach is at the head of Crooked River and runs between the townships of Gerroa in the north and Shoalhaven Heads in the south, with Seven Mile Beach National Park bordering it to the west, still with remnants of littoral (seaside) rainforest. Its original inhabitants were the indigenous Wodi Wodi people who spoke the Dharawal language [see Aboriginal display and notes], but its scenic beauty made it a popular holiday and recreation spot for the early Europeans from the Sydney area, as well as those from nearby Berry and Gerringong. Indeed, it was often referred to as Berry Beach before it acquired its current name.

FIRST EUROPEANS

It is believed that the first Europeans to walk on Seven Mile Beach were the survivors of the wreck of *Sydney Cove*. In 1797, only nine years after the start of European settlement, the wooden merchant ship, *Sydney Cove*, developed a serious leak during a storm on its voyage from Calcutta to Sydney. Some of the officers and crew were washed overboard, a large amount of the cargo was lost, and Captain Hamilton ordered the ship to be abandoned, wrecked on Preservation Island, in Bass Strait. The captain sent a crew in a longboat to row the 800km up the NSW coast to Port Jackson for help. The longboat was also wrecked, crossing Bass Strait, leaving the 17 crew to hike overland, all the way. After 6 weeks of arduous trekking (involving both attacks and assistance from various Aboriginal groups along the way), three men, Hugh Thompson, William Clarke and an Indian Lascar, arrived on Seven Mile Beach on 1st May, 1797, and eventually made it to Sydney to raise the alarm. Hamilton and other survivors were rescued by Matthew Flinders, but Hamilton died in 1798.

HORSES & CARS

With the first Europeans settling in the Gerringong and Berry areas from the 1820's onwards, the length and (low tide) width of the beach made it a superb place for horse racing. The sand, containing a lot of harder particles of quartz and eroded granite, meant that it compacted and thus became a ready-made and popular horse racing track from the 1860's onwards.

In the 1920's, as cars became more available, the beach was looked on as being a race track for cars, as well as horses. Still with no bridge from Gerroa to the beach (that wouldn't happen until 1942), cars would have to travel via Berry to get to the beach, or risk trying to cross Crooked River at low tide. But, such was the popularity of car racing in Sydney, that in March 1925 more than 2 000 spectators watched speed trials held by the Royal Automobile Club of Sydney, on Seven Mile Beach. A Sydney newspaper, *The Daily Guardian*, offered a trophy and prize money, together worth £100 (over \$250 000 in today's money), for the first driver to break the 100 miles per hour (161 kph) speed barrier.

HARKNESS & SMITH

Sydney driver, Don Harkness, in a modified 'Overland' car, which he named "Whitey", achieved 87 mph (140 kph) on his first attempt. Determined to win the prize and the prestige, Harkness then bought a V8 Hispano-Suiza aircraft engine for a 'Minerva' car chassis, and raced it to 107.75 mph (173 kmh) on Seven Mile Beach, on 17th October, 1925, to claim the record. From then on, the beach was more often referred to as Gerringong Speedway; car races replaced horse races, and the scene was set for a challenge to the Australian land speed record.

On 1st December, 1929, Norman "Wizard" Smith raced his specially built car, "Anzac", fitted with a Rolls-Royce aircraft engine, to a new Australian record of 128.57 mph (206.9 kph). This success ensured that Seven Mile Beach became a frequent venue for car and motorcycle races, right up to 1961, often with crowds of 2- 3 000. Stars of the Maroubra and Penrith Speedways raced here: A.V. Turner, known as "The Prince of Drivers", raced

Bugatti 'Itala' cars; Mrs J.A.S. Jones drove her supercharged Alfa Romeo here, and William Thompson raced his Type 37A Bugatti to the cheers of the crowds.

As an engineer, Don Harkness was well-known on the Sydney and Penrith circuits. It was he who built the record-breaking car "Anzac" for Smith, and also another one for him – "Enterprise", which also broke the Australasian record, at 164 mph (265.7 kph), in 1932 in New Zealand. Smith then decided to alter the car's cooling system, annoying Harkness who left N.Z. in disgust, began legal proceedings against him, and apparently never spoke to Smith again. (Smith also wanted to retain the name "Anzac" on his record-breaking car, and applied to the Attorney-General to do so, but the government refused him permission!) He also twice broke the Brisbane-to-Sydney record in 1933, and drove right around Australia in 45 days in 1936.

CARS VERSUS AEROPLANES

On the same day that Smith and "Anzac" broke the land speed record, 1st December, 1929, there was a scheduled race between a car (a Chrysler Roadster) and an aeroplane (a DH-60 Moth) at Seven Mile Beach, to see which was faster over a measured mile. Unfortunately, another aeroplane, being used to photograph the event, crashed into the surf before the race, killing the pilot (Jesse O'Connor) and photographer (William Berg). A local teenager, Bruce Winley, next day found part of the propeller near the shore. [It is now on display in the museum, together with a book about DH-60 Moths, which Bruce Winley also wrote].

KINGSFORD SMITH & SOUTHERN CROSS

On 11th January, 1933, Australia's most famous aviator, Sir Charles Kingsford Smith, took off from the beach in his world-renowned *Southern Cross*, on the first commercial flight across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand. Fully laden with crew, passengers, mail and goods, the aircraft was too heavy to take off from Richmond or Mascot. Smithy knew of the car races on Seven Mile Beach and the hardness of the sand. Together with its length and width at low tide, he deemed the beach to be the best place for taking off on a well-publicised flight that he hoped would begin interest in fast airmail, freight and passenger trips between Australia and New Zealand. After 14 hours and 10 minutes, he landed *Southern Cross* in New Plymouth, New Zealand. [For more on Kingsford Smith, see the separate display and notes].

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