MAY MEETING: “GEORGE BASS—NAVAL SURGEON—
MERCHANT ADVENTURER”.

Our Guest Speaker was Capt. C. W. T. Henderson, (Maritime Services Board) and HON. SEC. MANLY, WARRINGAH and PITT-WATER HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Those who were privileged to hear this address were very thankful to Capt. Henderson for choosing as his subject, one, namely ‘George Bass’ who played such an outstanding part in the first years of the Colony.

The following is a very brief resume of this interesting address:

Born on a Lincolnshire farm, the son and grandson of a farmer, George Bass from his earliest years always thirsted for adventure by salt water.

As a boy he read widely on Natural History and voyages of exploration and his love of adventure was fostered by his Lincolnshire associations, for many men famous in early Australian exploration and discovery—Flinders—Banks—Franklin and others who actually sailed with Cook—hailed from this corner of England.

In his early days, the plans were to make him a doctor and after a 5 years apprenticeship to a surgeon and apothecary, he took his Diploma with Honours at the Surgeons Hall London at the age of 18 years. Love of the sea and adventure prompted him to join the Royal Navy where he saw service against the French.
Putting into effect his professed intention, as indicated in his letter to Sir Joseph Banks, of exploring more of our coastline than any other of his predecessors, he obtained an appointment in H.M.S. RELIANCE sailing for Port Jackson. With the ships officers Hunter, Waterhouse, Shortland, Flinders and Bass as Surgeon, all of one common interest, they must have been a happy group.

How greatly can we regret today that we have no tape recording of their conversations across the Ward-room table!

Described as “the most interesting man in the Colony” Bass was six feet tall, dark complexioned, and very handsome. Physically strong, he loathed inactivity and despised danger. Always the difficulty of the task appealed to him.

Of much greater interest than the medical conditions was the state of exploration in the Colony. With his friend Flinders—“a determination was formed of completing the exploration of the east coast of N.S.W. by all such opportunities as the duty of the ship and procurable means would admit”.

Although their boat the “TOM THUMB” is probably the most famous craft in Australian history, nothing really definite, despite exhaustive research, is known about her construction. On their second voyage, another “TOM THUMB” was used of “nearly the same size” that had since been built at Port Jackson. This was followed up with Bass’s unsuccessful attempt to cross the Blue Mountains, in 1796.

In 1770 Captain Cook’s map of New Holland represented that country and Van Dieman’s Land as one. It was left to Naval Surgeon George Bass in a whaleboat with a crew of six to discover the strait which now bears his name. Flinders wrote: “A voyage expressly undertaken for discovery in an open boat and in which six hundred miles of coast, mostly in a boisterous climate, was explored, has not perhaps its equal in the annals of maritime history. The public will award to its high spirited and able conductor, alas! now no more, an honourable place in the list of those whose ardour stands most conspicuously for the promotion of useful knowledge”.

Returning to England as “Unfit for duty”, Bass went on half pay, during which time he married Elizabeth, sister of his former captain, Waterhouse. A commercial venture now attracted Bass, who sailed in 1800 for Port Jackson in his ship the “VENUS”. In further commercial voyages to the Islands of the Pacific he demonstrated his remarkable versatility in navigating seas of which he had no previous knowledge. It was on one such voyage in February 1803 he cleared Sydney Heads in ballast in command of the “VENUS”, that he disappeared and since when no authentic news has been heard of him.