MAY MEETING:

The speaker at the May meeting of the Society was Mr. Ian Young, B.Ec. (Foundation President, Kiama and District Historical Society), who has kindly provided the following summary of his talk:

The Robertson Basin, Kiama Harbour

From the early days of its settlement Kiama, and indeed the whole Illawarra Coast, was almost totally dependent upon the sea and upon ships for its contact with the outside world. Roads were virtually non-existent and at best were little more than bridle tracks. Travel from Sydney, by land, was by way of Campbelltown to Appin and thence around Mount Keira to Wollongong, Albion Park and Jam­beroo. Thence the track ran over the slopes of Saddleback Mountain to Gerringong, passing several miles to the west of Kiama. The route via Tom Ugly's Point and Bulli Pass was not practicable for use by vehicles until 1871. The sea, therefore, was the lifeline of Kiama by which settlers and supplies were brought in and produce was shipped out to Sydney and the rest of the world.

For many years Kiama's harbour was the sheltered bay, discovered in 1797 by George Bass, sheltered by Blowhole Point from
the winds and seas from the south. At the landward end of the Point, in front of the present-day Brighton Hotel, was a low point similar to the one at the seaward end of the peninsula. Through this gap, in heavy weather, the seas swept in from Storm Bay raging across Black Beach to Pheasant Point meeting the seas as they swept in from the open ocean. The turmoil in the bay at such times made the little harbour quite unusable, and for periods of up to two or three weeks ships could neither enter nor leave Kiama.

Ships entering the port anchored in the open bay and passengers and cargo were then carried ashore by dinghys and when these grounded the freight, human and otherwise, was carried ashore by the sailors and deposited under the shelter of the fig tree which grew back from the beach behind the present day Scots Church. Here too, under the fig tree the outgoing produce was assembled for shipment to Sydney. The range of such produce was quite remarkable—for example in the week ending 1st February 1868 the Illawarra Steam Navigation Company shipped out of Kiama:- 188 kegs of butter, 75 pigs, 15 calves, 2 horses, 12 coops of fowls, 8 cases of eggs, 6 packages of bacon, 20 lambs, 57 hides and 8 bundles of skins and sun-dries.

Sailing days were days of great activity. People thronged to the harbour in carts, on horseback and on foot carrying produce or driving live stock for shipment out and collecting empty kegs and cases and bundles of supplies. At such times, in the 1860's up to 500 people crowded the Kiama Harbour. Add to these the pigs, calves, fowls, and other animals and the scene must have been highly colourful and very noisy, but all depended upon the weather and the seas. At one time during March 1865 the storms were such that the pile up on Kiama’s Harbour front of butter alone reached 600 kegs. As the price paid in Sydney for the butter depended upon its condition on arrival, delays of this kind meant a heavy loss for the farmers and dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of the harbour mounted over the years.

Various measures were taken to improve the anchorage. In 1848 mooring chains were laid across the bay and skin-divers to-day still find these on the sea bed. A jetty was built in 1849 but storms swept it away and it had to be rebuilt. Even this jetty was inadequate and only one vessel could be worked at any time, so that any others wishing to use the port had to anchor out in the open bay.

For the small sailing vessels of the early days the journey from Sydney to Kiama probably took much the same time as modern yachts take in ocean races, but in adverse seas and winds it was a matter of days rather than hours. The small paddle wheel steamers of the 1850's and 1860's were much more reliable and in May 1867 the S.S. Hunter of the Illawarra Steam Navigation Company ran from Sydney to Wollongong in 3 hours and 50 minutes. For all of these coastal vessels the journey could be highly dangerous, and the wrecks of many of them littered the coast from South Head southwards. A number of them were wrecked within Kiama Harbour itself or on the headlands to the north and south of it. One of the best known of these was the “Rangoon,” which on 22nd March 1870 was swept ashore on Stack Island at the mouth of the Minnamurra River.

On that morning, after a night of heavy storms, the village of
Kiama was rife with rumours that two vessels had been wrecked off-shore overnight; one off Porter's Garden Beach (Bombo Beach) and one off the Minnamurra River. The former proved to be merely the trunk of a large tree which had been washed out to sea, but the latter was only too real.

Early that morning Captain Charles of "Eureka" set out to inspect the damage his property may have suffered in the storm. As he reached the headland above the Minnamurra entrance he was astonished to see a fine vessel of 300 or 400 tons stranded on the rocks off the centre of the island in the river mouth. He could clearly read the name "Rangoon" on the stern of the vessel and see the crew ashore on the island or working to salvage what they could on the vessel itself.

Captain Charles hurriedly returned to his home where he yoked up his bullock dray and proceeded to Kiama Harbour to get the Illawarra Steamship Company's dinghy. As he returned to the Minnamurra he found another bullock dray approaching the opposite bank. This was a group made up of two captains and selected seamen from three vessels, "Agenoria," "Numba" and "Dairymaid," which had sheltered overnight at Shellharbour. The combined efforts of the two parties succeeded in rescuing all of the crew members of the "Rangoon," though the vessel was a total loss.

It is understandable that by the 1860's the people of Kiama were unhappy about the safety of their harbour and the inadequacy of its facilities. The colonial government had approved the building of a basin at Wollongong and a similar one at Kiama. The Wollongong Basin was given priority and the patience of the Kiama people was wearing very thin when at last tenders were called on 24th March 1868 for carrying plant and stores from Wollongong to Kiama on behalf of the Department of Public Works. Optimism ran high that work would soon commence but very little happened until 2nd July 1868 when a cargo of materials required was reported as being landed at Kiama. By the end of the year steady progress was being made. A breakwater had to be constructed and a coffer dam built to hold back the sea water. Material for the breakwater was quarried on the spot and the excavation so made remains to-day—the courts of the Blow-hole Tennis Club occupy it.

During 1869 and 1870 work proceeded by fits and starts and by April 1870 £35,000 had been spent and the Assembly was asked to vote an additional £9,700 to complete the work. Mr. Henry Parkes spoke critically of the project, claiming that it had resulted in spoiling a naturally good harbour, but supported the allocation of funds although he claimed the harbour would never be as good as it had been naturally.

Twelve months later, work was interrupted when the government tried to economise by cutting the daily wage of divers and carpenters from 10/- to 8/- per day. Was this stoppage our first maritime strike? If it was, it lasted three weeks until one stage of the coffer dam collapsed—"the timbers being allowed to rot unused during the time they might have served their purpose." Through 1872, '73, '74 and 1875 the work dragged on until in August 1876 apertures were cut in the wall of the coffer dam to admit the sea water. The end was now in sight; the coffer dam had to be removed and the surround-
ings of the basin tidied up. A meeting on 28th August 1868 decided that the basin be named after Mr. John Robertson, Premier of N.S.W., and a later meeting named Wednesday 13th September as the day for the official opening.

Nature intervened to upset the plans. On Tuesday, September 5th, it was reported that the previous night the coffer dam had finally collapsed from rot and the pent-up waters in the basin "had uncere-

moniously shoved that structure into the sea." Then on Saturday 9th and Sunday 10th September, a violent storm blew away all likelihood of an official opening on Wednesday 13th.

The postponed ceremony took place one week later, 20th September 1876, when Miss Anne Elizabeth Charles, daughter of Capt. Samuel Charles, mentioned earlier, formally broke a bottle of wine against the harbour wall and named the basin the Robertson Basin.