EARLY THIRRROUL

I was a boy of nine when my family went to live at Thirroul in, I think, 1915.

Thirroul was then a quiet, pleasant little town, which had outgrown the sleepy hamlet stage and was already an established town in its own right. It had a school with seven teachers. It had its railway station, hall, post office, hotel, doctor, dentist, chemist, general store and many other smaller shops. The Excelsior coal mine in the foothills of the Illawarra Range behind the town was in full operation.

Streets were laid out and though there were no tarred streets the main road, now Lawrence Hargrave Drive, and some other streets were of blue metal surface. Although a large number of buildings had been erected, there were still many vacant allotments and open paddocks. Most of the houses were wooden or fibro, a few brick. Some of the miners' cottages were painfully small. I remember some (I think three) new weatherboard cottages being built on the northern side of Bulli Pass Road near its junction with Main Road between Thirroul and Bulli. Thirroul was for all practical purposes continuous with Austinmer to the north, but between Thirroul and Bulli to the south there was some open country, where cabbage palms abounded. There were literally thousands of them.

Many of the menfolk, including teenage boys, were coal miners. There was also at that time, situated on a ridge above the railway line between Thirroul and Austinmer, 'a navvies' camp for men working on the construction of the Thirroul shunting yards and the engine round-house. This work entailed blasting operations and I well remember while at school the periodic explosions, followed soon after by the most obnoxious stench drifting up the hillside on the breeze, causing the giggling children to hold their noses.

The population was the usual urban mix - shopkeepers, railway employees, postal staff, teachers, clergymen, butchers, bakers, carriers, tradesmen and so on. Dr. Crossle (pronounced cross-lee) had his surgery in his private house on the eastern side of Main Road, about halfway between the railway station and the creek. I recollect the brass plate on his gate. The nearest hospital was the Bulli Cottage Hospital. Mr. Attwater, the chemist, had a shop, also on the eastern side of Main Road on the hill not far from the railway station. Mr. Neale, a dentist, opened a surgery in a then newly built two-storeyed commercial building further down from Mr. Attwater, past the Church of England. Before that we had to go to a dentist at Bulli. I can remember a policeman named Easterbrook, but I cannot remember if there was a police station at Thirroul or if Mr. Easterbrook came from Bulli.

There were many immigrants from all parts of the British Isles. This was, of course, in the days when the Australian population was over 95% British stock. The immigrants were called Pommies, the same as today, but I don't think the name was used in the same disparaging way it is often used now. Some of our schoolmates were new arrivals, with their varying native accents, but most of us mixed well with them.

Thirroul catered for holiday makers and day tourists, mostly in the summer season. They used to come by train (steam train), for this was before the days of
the motor car and improved roads when city people could travel further afield. It should be remembered that most people worked on Saturday morning, so Sunday was the busy day for the day trippers. Shops, banks, post offices, factories, warehouses - they all worked on Saturday mornings. There was even a letter delivery on Saturday. This was during the 44-hour week period.

There were boarding houses and holiday cottages, but no motels, caravan parks, or camping grounds; in fact there were no caravans. Hotels provided casual accommodation. I can remember quite well one boarding house which was well patronised throughout the summer months. They had their own tennis court. At night guests used to have a sing-song round the piano. More people played the piano in those days. Of course, there was no radio or television. The first crystal wireless sets appeared in the twenties, and television was not introduced till the fifties, first in black and white, in colour later still. People had to make their own entertainment. More people, including girls and boys, enjoyed reading books more than today, when so much time is spent staring at T.V.

Shops providing food and drink for day tourists were called tea rooms. There were none of what we these days call milk bars, and what we call delicatessens were then called ham-and-beef shops. Places like McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken are a recent development.

The main shopping area of Thirroul was just west of the railway station. Here Eagles & Higgins had their general store. Here was the post office and the Hotel Ryan. I know there was a watchmaker-jeweller and a wine shop, and, though I cannot actually remember them, there must surely have been those other adjuncts of urban life - bank, stationer-newsagent, real estate agent, butcher, greengrocer, baker, etc. Large motor garages, petrol pumps, used car saleyards, new car salesrooms were all undreamt of. Chinese market gardeners, I think from the Bulli area, delivered fruit and vegetables for sale once a week or so, using horse and cart. The baker and milkman delivered bread and milk to the door usually daily, also with horse and cart. (1) (See Appendix Item 1). Grocers and butchers delivered their goods too.

Besides the main shopping area near the station, there were scattered shops, singly or in groups, all along the main road towards Austinmer. Miss Wilson had a haberdashery a few doors south of Dr. Crossle's. Just across the bridge over the creek Mr. and Mrs. Jim Potts had tea-rooms they called "Ye Olde Tea Shoppe". Another large tea-rooms was built for the Nies family across the creek and across the road from the Potts. A wine bar was provided in the corner of this building, on the street corner, and the licensee was Mick McGrade, who also held the licence for the wine shop up in the town proper. Mr. Caiger opened a grocery store on the main road nearly opposite Dr. Crossle. I believe Mr. Caiger already had a store further north (Clifton ?). He placed a Mr. Bartlett in charge of the new Thirroul store. Unfortunately the store was totally destroyed by fire shortly after it opened. I can still see Mr. Caiger driving along the road in his sulky next morning to inspect the ruins, a sad old man.

As for churches, there were a Church of England, a Methodist and a Presbyterian The Roman Catholic church was at Bulli. The Church of England minister was the Rev. Mr. Dowe, who wore the old-fashioned, traditional parson's round, black, flat-crowned hat - the only one I have ever seen outside cartoons. Whether Mr.
Dowe wore it out of respect for tradition or because of some office he held in the church, such as canon or rural dean, I have never discovered. The Methodist minister was the Rev. Mr. Yates. A student minister, Hugh Ross, conducted services in the small Presbyterian church. I think he was called Pastor Ross. The Roman Catholic priest was Father Power. The three Thirroul churches were all wooden structures.

Silent pictures were shown in the Thirroul hall near the railway station, but they were very primitive. All movement and action was far too fast, and the children were always convulsed at the super-fast step of soldiers marching. The films were usually very badly scratched and the images on the screen flickered badly, causing the picture-shows themselves to be called "the flicks". It was some years before these faults were overcome, and it was to be 1930 or so before silent films gave way to sound, which were at first called talkies. I do not ever recall the word movie used, or motion pictures. Cinema was used occasionally, but was spelt kinema, suggesting that the word cinema should be pronounced with a hard c. As the films were silent, captions were flashed onto the screen giving in words what the actors were supposed to be saying, or explaining locations, times, days, etc. Much was necessarily conveyed by actions and gestures. The pictures were accompanied by a person playing the piano at the front of the hall. Atmosphere was created by exciting, slow, soothing, or other. I thoroughly enjoyed the comic films of Charlie Chaplin like "Easy Street", "Shoulder Arms" and the rest. I remember, too, a serial called "Gloria's Romance", starring Billie (female) Burke. I vaguely remember an open-air theatre there, but I cannot be certain.

Thirroul main beach was reached by a wooden footbridge across the creek that ran at the back of the beach. There was a clear grassy patch here near the junction of the two creeks. It was here that a Mr. George Armstrong had a dance-floor built. He had already opened a small shop called The Kiosk nearby, where soft drinks, ice creams and sweets were sold. The dance floor was a square polished floor with handrails round it, surrounded by rows of deck chairs for dancers or spectators. It was roofed and surrounded by a high paling fence. An admission charge was payable. The very capable pianist was Mr. Fred Holland. The place was named the Dance Arena, but to us children it was just "The Arena". The enterprise was not a great success.

Blackberries and lantana were already well established as pests, but blackberries at least had the advantage of producing fruit. We children picked the ripe berries to eat on the spot; or we took billy-cans to fill for making blackberry jam of jelly, or tart. (Billy-cans were like very small buckets with tight-fitting lids, usually for carrying liquids such as milk. See illustration in Macquarie Dictionary, p206). Full-time blackberry pickers in the fruit season sold them to jam factories by the 4-gallon tin. The cabbage-palm of cabbage-tree was plentiful, and when we were later to read about the pioneers making or wearing cabbage-tree hats, such as in Henry Lawson's stories, we knew what they were talking about.

There were two monuments at Thirroul about which my memory is very vague. One was a white statue of an Australian soldier standing on a pedestal in front of the Hall. Did it commemorate those lost in the South African (Boer) War? The other was a pillar at the beach which I hazily remember was erected to the memory of seamen lost in a shipwreck on Thirroul beach.
DOMESTIC LIFE
In my day at Thirroul we had electric lights in the home, and we had town supply water, but there was no sewerage.

The electric lights were rather primitive, low-powered bulbs. Fluorescent tubes and glareless sodium lighting for street use had not been invented. We had street lights, plain but larger bulbs, mounted on tall poles, with large circular shades to reflect the light downward. I do not remember having power in the home for any appliances.

The piped water was good, but as there was no sewerage system we could not have water-closets. The pan system was in operation, I think under Bulli Shire Council. (See Appendix Item 2) I did not hear of any septic tanks or cesspits at Thirroul, but they could have existed.

As one would expect in a coal-mining district, domestic fuel was mainly coal, but coke was also used, especially for winter warmth in open grates in fireplaces, because, once started, coke burnt without smoke or smell. Firewood was also used, and a certain amount of wood was always needed to start the coal or coke. Kindling wood was always plentiful in those days because fruit cases, kerosene cases, butter boxes and packing cases of all kinds and sizes were freely available and, being non-returnable, were generally chopped up for firewood. Cartons came much later. Fuel stoves were the norm. Reticulated coal-gas for lighting, heating and cooking was available in Sydney, but not at Thirroul.

Not all homes had electric lighting, so candles and kerosene lamps were still common. The kerosene-burning “Primus” stove was a very useful kitchen accessory. The kerosene was sold in four-gallon tins the shape of a square prism, and these were packed for delivery two to a case. The tins were known as kerosene tins and the cases as kerosene cases.

The days of the old flint, steel and tinder-box had passed, and wax matches called vestas were in use. Wooden safety matches came soon after and may have been in use in Sydney at the time.

The older cooking utensils were iron kettles and pots. These were followed by enamel, then aluminium. However, the first aluminium was soft and malleable, and so dented easily and wore out quickly. They learnt how to harden it later. Stainless steel had not been invented.

Household refrigerators were unheard of. The ice-chest was a useful alternative, but one had to live in a town near ice-works to be able to have an ice-chest. For those beyond the reach of ice-works, the old drip-safe, sometimes called the Coolgardie safe, was better than nothing and was used by our pioneers. The plaster of Paris butter-cooler kept the butter reasonably hard. The fly-proof kitchen safe or the hanging meat-safe kept flies, especially blow-flies, away from food and could be located in a cool place.

Most of the present-day household appliances which we take for granted had not been invented in those days, appliances such as the following:- Electric stoves, irons, jugs, toasters, radiators, mixers, washing machines, dish washers, air conditioners, hot water systems, blankets, fans, hair dryers, wash boilers, etc., etc. Also not known then were the modern plastics and the hundreds of articles, implements, materials and goods they are used for.

Kitchen sinks with attached draining board were not common and we had to use a separate tin or enamel wash-up dish with separate tray. Hot water came,
not from a hot water tap, but from the kettle on the stove. Similarly wash basins were separate basins, not set in.

There were no washing machines, so clothes washing was done by hand. Hard bar soap and washing soda were used, and there were none of the array of powders and detergents of today. The clothes might be rubbed on a washing-board. All except woollens were boiled in a copper boiler called simply a copper. However, as early dyes used to run (that is dissolve in the boiling water, even in cold water sometimes), the coloureds were washed separately till the time came when fast dyes (those that would not run) were discovered. The metal, copper, being a good conductor, the clothes boiled quickly. Some homes possessed a wringer, which wrung or squeezed the water out of the clothes before pegging out. Clothes hoists had not been introduced and clothes lines of twisted steel wire strung between posts were used. Clothes props in the centre of each line were used to raise the clothes higher after being pegged out.

Ironing was done with flat irons heated on the stove. The Mrs. Potts iron with detachable wooden handle came later than the flat iron and was in use during First War. We never had a petrol iron, but they were a boon to women in the country away from electric power.

Telephones? Yes, telephones were in use, but there were not many about. Telegrams were lodged at a post-office and sent by Morse code. They were fairly cheap and were used as much as the telephone. The postage on an ordinary letter was one penny, the penny post.

Many amenities accepted as normal today were either unknown then or beyond the purse of the average family, among them being wall-to-wall carpets, built in furniture, insect-proof doors and windows, home insulation, rotary lawn-mowers, garden hoses and sprinklers, spray painters, chain saws for firewood, microwave ovens, and probably many others.

HOUSES

House design and room lay-out in many homes were stereotyped and unimaginative, I suppose mainly because of cost. A central long, narrow hallway ran the length of the building, from front to back, with rooms opening out on each side, three, four or five rooms. There was usually a front main bedroom, the kitchen would be at the back, and perhaps a sitting-room cum dining-room either front or rear, the old parlour. There could be a separate laundry, perhaps lean-to. One could look right through the house into the back yard. The older country homes had a detached kitchen connected to the main building by a covered walkway, probably for fire control, but I do not remember any about the Illawarra.

Despite all this one decided advantage these old houses had over those of today was that they had verandahs - front, back and often sides too. These verandahs helped to keep the house cool and added to its amenity. They were often sheltered by attractive vines, decorated with pot-plants on pot-stands, and had welcoming cane chairs, deck chairs or stools, something old-fashioned rocking chairs. How relaxing and what a loss when we think of the little modern boxes!

Not all those Thirroul houses were of the stereotype, some were innovative and attractive.

I do not remember seeing or even hearing of flats during the first war, but they
may have been in vogue in the city. They became common between the wars. The modern unit and strata title system of tenure are a very recent development.

Most old houses had open fireplaces, with or without a grate, so that chimneys were a prominent feature. With modern gas and electric heaters, air conditioning and house insulation, chimneys have almost disappeared from the landscape. Every fireplace, including the kitchen, usually but not always, had a mantel-shelf above it, often a mantel-piece, which was the whole structure above and around the fireplace. The mantel-shelf was used for ornaments, for family photographs, vases of flowers, perhaps the family clock, and in the kitchen various canisters, sometimes in graduated sets of differing sizes, for containing such things as flour, sugar, tea, rice, sago, salt, and spices like cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon and the like, the flour being the largest and one of the spices the smallest. The shelf in the kitchen might be covered with a paper covering, either newspaper, brown paper or plain newsprint. This paper would hang down over the edge of the shelf in front, some six or eight inches, and be decorated with most attractive and original designs cut out with scissors. Some women with imagination and artistic flair devised a different design each time they changed the paper, which had to be often because the paper faded in the light and got smoked from the fire.

Floors were either plain boards or covered with linoleum. Carpets were for the wealthy. Wall-to-wall carpets for everybody were a luxury of the future. The linoleum could be in the form of a lino square or cut to fit wall to wall. When the household budget permitted, rectangular mats (rugs, floor rugs) were placed strategically over the lino, for softness, warmth and decoration. Small rectangular mats called door-runners could be placed in doorways. If the budget further permitted, carpet squares might be placed over the lino in the centre of the room, leaving the lino borders exposed. Sometimes lino squares and carpet squares were placed directly onto the floor boards and the exposed boards stained or varnished. However the modern hard wearing varnishes had not been discovered. Varnished parquet floors were for the rich.

Scrubbing floors was a laborious task for the housewife - on the knees with bucket, sandsoap, scrubbing brush and floor cloth, on a kneeling-pad probably consisting of a padded sugar-bag. Bare boards were hard work, and this meant all verandahs and also usually the kitchen. Linoleum had to be either mopped or washed on the knees, and then, almost as hard as scrubbing, polished with floor-wax. Most women took pride in their glistening floors but it was hard physical work. There were no mechanical floor polishers then, nor vacuum cleaners, nor paid carpet shampooers.

(to be continued)

These are the reminiscences of Mr. J. Britton. Biographical details will be provided at the completion of the article in a future Bulletin.