OLD ALBION PARK, 1900-1925—SOME CHARACTERS:

A feature of the rural scene in those days was the “swaggie”; with a bluey (bedroll) slung across his back, carrying a blackened tea billy in one hand, sometimes leading a blue cattle dog, and wearing old and patched clothing, these bearded derelicts drifted along country roads, sleeping in old sheds or under bridges and seeming never to work. Many had a round of homes at which they would turn up periodically to cadge a meal, and at times one would decide to make his permanent home in some dissued shanty near a township and join the ten-bob-a-week pensioners who sat about the hotel verandah hoping that someone would buy them a beer. Albion Park had a few of these harmless oldtimers.

One well-known regular was Paddy Murphy, who would blow in to a farm and offer to cut a few sticks of firewood in return for a meal; most times the meal was given in return for a session of Paddy’s Irish wit.

Once while Pat was listening to the Salvation Army band in Kiama and puffing away at his reeking old pipe, the Salvo captain conducting the band stepped back into Paddy and rammed the pipe down his throat. To his roar of protest the captain replied, “My good man, if the Lord had meant you to smoke he would have put a chimney in your head.”

“Me good man,” snarled Paddy, “if Jesus had meant you to walk backwards he would have put eyes in yer arse.”

Many were the tales of local characters, one being of the farmer who rode into town and bought several pounds of sausages which he stuffed into a holey pocket of his old overcoat before heading for the pub and a few grogs for the road. Some time later one of his cronies asked one of the old bar-flies if he had seen him; “And sure oi did,” was the reply, “the poor soul had a few drinks, jumped on his horse and tore up the street as if the divil himself was after him and with his poor bloody entrails streaming out behind him.”

Another story dealt with old Mickey Burn’s description of a horse riding incident. “Oi wuz up in the gully on the hill beyant and Paddy Larkin foired a shot; ould Jike—he waz a young harse then—into the buckin’ and oi give you my oath he trew foive bucks and out of the foive oi sthuck six. If that wasn’t good roidin’ among sthones oi don’t knaw phwat wuz.”

For many years old Bill Webster was gravedigger and verger for the Church of England; cantankerous and sharp of tongue he was the terror of the kids and always ready to abuse adults. At the funeral of one local identity, after filling in the grave and neatly rounding off the top whilst mourners and friends looked on, old Bill gave the mound a final hearty smack with the shovel, glared at the assembly with an eye like a mad gander and said, “And that was an old b— r I never liked.”

Just as every place has its characters and hard cases, it also has the reverse. Albion Park was no exception, in those who grew up to be postmasters and businessmen, clergymen and priests, school principals and bankers. During World War I the infant and only son of the manager of the local branch of the E.S. & A. Bank used to ride his tricycle on the footpath outside the bank. In the Second World War, as “Killer” Caldwell, he was Australia’s top RAAF ace and fighter pilot with 29 enemy aircraft downed.

In 1914 the army man in charge of the Light Horse headquarters in the main street was Warrant-Officer Barham, father of a large family, most
of whom attended the Park school. His five sons served as officers in the AIF in World War II, ranking from a Major-General downwards.

Three Westons who were schoolboys there in 1914-18 served in the last war—one in the hospital ship “Manunda,” one spent 3½ years in a Japanese prison camp, and one commanded an AIF engineer unit in the Islands campaign.

One could reminisce further and at length but the foregoing should ring a bell with many folk still living, not only at Albion Park, but in every farming township and district along the coast; the conditions and way of life as described were common to them all.

I asked what among many recollections of boyhood and schooldays at the “Park” stands out in particular, I would say the day-long ring and music of hammer on anvil from the various smithies, plus the acrid smell of their coal fires being blown up as one bicycled to the train on frosty mornings; or on wet mornings the universal smell of kerosene burning that pervaded the village as it was poured over damp kindling wood in most kitchens.

(Concluded)

—B. E. WESTON.

WHAT GOES ON AT THE HARBOUR?

In view of recent press reports, at the November meeting of the Council of the Society it was resolved that the following letter be forwarded to the Minister for Public Works:

The Council of this Society has seen a press announcement indicating that the commercial slipway at Wollongong Harbour is to be widened and that the ramp facilities for pleasure craft are to be “upgraded.”

This news item is viewed with some apprehension because a few years ago Wollongong City Council put forward a proposal to concrete over some natural rocks to provide launching facilities for large numbers of boats at Wollongong Harbour. This would have destroyed a natural asset consisting of rocks and sand which, as long as there has been a Wollongong, has traditionally been a safe and attractive playing area for young children. This previous threat was defeated by public outcry.

You will readily understand that we are still apprehensive on the subject of interference with the amenity of this historic spot, and would therefore ask for your assurance that whatever is contemplated will be done sympathetically and so as not to interfere with the natural environment.

This Society would therefore ask that you be kind enough to furnish us with details of what is presently proposed in relation to the widening of the commercial facility and what is planned for the future in relation to the private facilities. Your co-operation in preserving this historic heart of Wollongong is earnestly sought.

“THE WOLLONGONG PILOT SERVICE, 1840-1867”:

This booklet by the late A. P. Fleming, based on his paper “Postscript for Pilot” read at the September 1973 meeting of the Society, will be on sale at the December meeting. (Price to be announced).