TOURISM IN THE TWIN TOWNS
THIRROUL- AUSTINMER 1890-1930

By the mid 1880s, both Thirroul (then known as Robbinsville) and Austinmer began to be distinguished from the general area known as North Bulli. Austinmer was the bigger village, with its own mine, associated cottages, a handful of stores and a Progress Committee. Thirroul slowly began to develop when some miners decided it was preferable to live at some distance from their workplaces at Old Bulli or Austinmer Collieries.

A few hardy tourists visited the already famous Bulli Pass area before the opening of the rail-line to Sydney in 1888. The attractions were "the fern gullies, mountains and safe-bathing places" according to a Mercury correspondent. The only accommodation available after the opening of the railway was to be found in Thirroul. The railway made tourism possible and Thirroul quickly gained a Post Office and a school.

At the onset of the 1890s depression, Austinmer was still the slightly larger village and looked slightly better placed to survive the crash and emerge as a popular resort. The collapse of the mine put paid to such dreams. And before the onset there were dreams aplenty. One visionary reported in the Mercury in late 1888, that hot-air balloons and a cable-car to the lookout above Thirroul would soon be servicing the towns. The depression, however, brought such flights of fancy firmly back to earth.

By 1896, Austinmer’s mine was closed and newspaper descriptions report the town as something akin to the proverbial deserted village. Business was so bad, even the hotel closed down permanently.

Recovery was very slow but by the turn of the century tourists were returning in considerable numbers. Bulli Pass was still the major attraction and the Thirroul station was commonly known as the Bulli Pass Station. A considerable number of guesthouses had sprung up in the town and a Progress Committee devoted to attracting tourists was established in Thirroul. Tourism in Austinmer was still on a very small scale.

Subdivision of residential land had taken place in Thirroul as early as 1888 and many Sydneysiders purchased land and built holiday cottages. The first such subdivision took place in Austinmer in 1905 and most of the land was snapped up by people from Sydney who were brought to the town by a real estate agent offering free-rail tickets. Surprisingly, Austinmer and Thirroul quickly developed a reputation as the premier seaside resorts in N.S.W. The sudden increase in popularity of sun-bathing after 1905 aided this reputation.

Tourism, however, always has negative aspects. The first complaint about vandalism and destruction of the environment of the area I have found dates from 1888. Regular complaints are reported in the local papers in the first 3 decades of the century. In 1900, tourists from plague-infected Sydney caused a bubonic plague-scare (fortunately false) in Thirroul.

Throughout the early years of the century Austinmer remained the quiet little village the 1890s depression had left it. Thirroul went ahead in leaps and bounds. In 1905, the Excelsior Colliery was first opened. A surf club was formed in 1907. Numerous subdivisions took place in the following years. The first Kings Theatre was opened in 1913. The School of Arts was built in the same
A golf course was opened in 1914. The railway depot and marshalling yards were commenced in 1915 and completed by 1917. Duplication of the railway line was completed, encouraging even more tourists. Innumerable guesthouses were constructed.

Austinmer could match none of this. The Outlook guesthouse, however, (established by 1911) was a popular tourist destination. An Austinmer Progress Committee was formed in 1914 and hired a life-saver for the beach, lobbied to return and ensure the beach-foreshore was accessible to the public and established a walking-track to Sublime Point. These facilities benefited Thirroul as much as Austinmer and many Austinmer residents remained bitter over the fact that the Thirroul School of Arts had been established so far from Austinmer (especially as many Austinmer residents contributed towards its construction).

In 1919, Thirroul’s development was furthered by construction of the Vulcan Firebrick Company’s works. It was not good for the tourist trade, however, Coal-fired kilns created considerable pollution. Moreover, the railway depot smack in the middle of the town was another ugly and noxious blot on the town’s resort status. The miners from the colliery also blackened the scene by walking home from the pit covered in coal-dust before washing facilities were belatedly made available by the mine-owners in the mid 1920s. All this was to Austinmer’s favour and by 1922, Thirroul was losing its edge in the tourist stakes and Austinmer began to hail itself as the ‘Riviera’ of N.S.W.

The establishment of the Thirroul open-air dancing arena in 1919 and the Arcadia Theatre in 1923 did little to stem the drift to Austinmer as both were within easy walking distance of Austinmer, being situated on the now rapidly developing northern side of the town. The original Thirroul township was contained on the western side of the railway line. The small scale of tourist development in Austinmer and retention of its village atmosphere worked continually in Austinmer’s favour and by 1930 Austinmer was clearly the premier coastal resort.

Thirroul residents had constructed a rock pool on South Thirroul beach in 1923 but it paled in comparison to the grandiose schemes of Councillor Clowes of Austinmer. Clowes spear-headed development of the present rock-pool and promenade at Austinmer in the late 1920s. It was completed in 1930 at the fabulous cost of 10,000 pounds. It was the icing on the cake in terms of attracting tourists to Austinmer rather than Thirroul. The fact that it remains standing strong today while Thirroul’s rock-pool is in ruins is testimony to its success. It’s construction ensured Austinmer would survive as a tourist resort after the Great Depression which followed its construction.

If there is a lesson to be learnt from the history of tourism in the Northern Illawarra it is likely to be that large-scale development is inappropriate and unsuccessful. Sensible and appropriate development of the natural beauties of the area has preserved the natural beauty of the Austinmer area and enabled it to retain its attraction to tourists. The development of the Headlands site, recently approved by Council, would not appear to have heeded these lessons. Unless a full-scale depression intervenes, as it did in the 1880s and 1930s, Austinmer may well go the way of its less fortunate neighbour, Thirroul.

Joseph Davis, Thirroul 1987

(A summary of Mr. Davis’s address to the Society on 7th October, 1987)