

Waves of Settlement

Gladstone 1940 - 1963

Second World War to the closure of Swifts

In 1940 Gladstone resolutely prepared to offer its services to the War effort, but few can have had any inkling of how big the 'ask' was going to be.

Some five hundred local women and men enlisted, most of whom then left home for several years. Those left behind became caught up in all the civil defence arrangements and support organisations necessary to a war effort.

The infamous Brisbane Line had been drawn, making it doubly difficult for civil authorities to find funding for necessities like up-dated water and electricity supplies, an aerodrome, and improved road communications.

All that changed after Pearl Harbour, when Americans recognised long-held local claims to have Queensland's best harbour. Between early of 1942 and mid-1944, tens of thousands of American troops moved through Gladstone, housed in encampments and/or depots on Barney Point and Auckland Hill, at the showgrounds, and at Byellee, Burua, and Beecher.

Townfolk swung into action to support the American military effort. All available manpower was pressed into action, and men came from far and wide to take up essential work in Gladstone. Fears that waterside workers would not be able to handle wartime loading schedules were completely dispelled as expected four-day turn arounds were



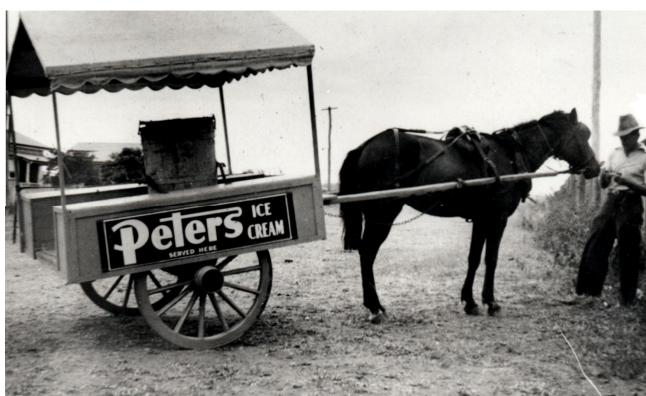
Helen Mangan and a friend dressed as cigarette girls at a fancy dress party held at Coronas' Skating Rink

reduced to a mere eighteen hours. Most loading and unloading was done with old wheelbarrows which were absolute strangers to ball bearings!

Young women took over jobs previously reserved for men, older women and those with family commitments knitted, made camouflage nets, entertained, ran dances and railway tea rooms-and constantly fund-raised for the fighting forces. Little boys had a good time cadging treats from American soldiers.

By 1945, however, everyone was ready to welcome in the peace-from public Victory Parades to private family reunions and quiet memorial services, people were welcomed back or mourned appropriately. Citizens then attempted to do as they were told and 'get on with business as usual'.

Wartime had boosted the permanent population of the Gladstone census district, and most public utilities were long overdue for up-dating. This work was frustratingly slow as state and federal governments had other priorities, wartime shortages of materials and equipment continued well into the fifties, and conflicting local interest groups fought to bring their needs to the foreground of administrative attention.



Pod Baynton with his horse and Cart 1946. Mr Baynton would sell ice cream in the streets of Gladstone when times were slow at the Meatworks

In 1941, using borrowed finance, water was finally brought from Pikes' Crossing. Until a treatment plant, pump houses and accommodation were installed it was often muddy and unpleasant to taste.

Not even the war had convinced the powers that be down south that the seaplane service was inadequate. After much

indecision about where to put it, an aerodrome was finally achieved in 1956, largely due to Thies brothers forcing the hand of vacillating administrations.

Since 1926 the electricity supply had come from a series of local generators, just able to cope with the load of over one thousand subscribers, 121 street lights and increasing demand from industry. In 1946 the Capricornia Regional Electricity Board (CREB) was created and Gladstone was finally switched to supply from the Rockhampton Power Station in 1953. Surrounding townships, Calliope, Mt Larcom, Miriam Vale and Yarwin, followed in the next few years.

Perhaps the biggest change in this period was the gradual encroachment of the railway and waterfront loading facilities on the shoreline. The battle of commercial vs recreational use of the harbour had started many years earlier. Just as war broke out Council allowed, then quickly disallowed Shell to lease additional land on Auckland Hill. In 1942, however, Shell renewed its request and it seemed 'unpatriotic' to refuse-excavation was carried out and a little more of the Hill was removed.

Local and state government, the Harbour Board, the Chamber of Commerce, the Trades and Labour Council, the local ALP branch, and private citizens-all engaged in the protracted debate-at times fiery, at others little more than a slow burn.

Eventually, in 1958, a public meeting called for the preservation of Auckland Hill and the securing Victoria Park. The Hill seemed to have been saved, but the gradual 'reclamation' of land joining Auckland and Barney Points was made all the easier by the purchase, at the end of the war, of a bulldozer-the triumph of industry and jobs over environment was a foregone conclusion.

There were other, less controversial



Joe Lee and Digger Crowe were guards at the Shell installation tanks during the war c1940

projects afoot, especially in the fields of health and education. In 1928 only six boys from Gladstone took the crucial Scholarship examination, and had to go elsewhere for further education. In 1945 twelve boys and girls in a makeshift school 'high-top' demonstrated their ability by passing the Junior examination with very good results.

Parents began to clammer for Senior education. In 1954, twenty years after Alderman Denny conducted the first private secondary school in the town, the first sub-senior class, seven students, was enrolled and by 1963 fifteen students in the Gladstone State High School took the Senior examination.

The demand for better health care was also strong in the postwar period. The General Hospital needed both space and more staff, but the only major building program was a new maternity block-not opened until 1953. In 1957 a blood bank was opened and a home nursing service began in 1959. Maternal and Child Welfare Services, started in 1941 in rented accommodation, acquired its own building in William Street in 1959.

The year that stands out in the post war period must be 1949-the cyclone year, which hit the town on Wednesday 2 March.

One man was killed and a great deal of private and public property was completely destroyed - anecdotes tell of the demolition of church property while pubs remained unscathed and of the toppling of many an outdoor dunny. In the *Observer* of 5 March the Mayor claimed that £100, 000 worth of damage had been done, but it seems that no more accurate figure has ever been put on the financial cost of this disaster and collective shell shock meant that the district took a long while to recover.

A much happier event took place a couple of weeks afterwards when seven boats took part in the first Brisbane to Gladstone yacht race. The winner was *Sea Prince* (John Bourne), with line honours to G Pickers' *Hoana*. The Race immediately became an annual event-by 1963 the field had expanded to



Church of England after 1949 cyclone

fourteen and was soon seen on television all over Australia. Perhaps one of the few organisations to benefit materially from the cyclone was the Sailing Club-members were slowly building their club house when trees blown down at Calliope were donated to the cause-and provided all the timber for framework and an exceptional dance floor.



One night's catch for a wharfies fishing trip on Eric Dunnet's boat, 'Calypso'- Gladstone, circa 1950

Out of the Yacht Race has come the annual Harbour Festival, started in 1962. The Festival exemplifies Gladstone's reputation for great parties. Other big celebrations included the centenary of Gladstone in 1954, welcoming the Olympic Torch in 1956, commemorations of the exploits of Matthew Flinders in 1957 and the centenary of Queensland in 1959.

Throughout the fifties, Gladstone was locked in mortal combat with other potential coal-handling ports. State governments, local administrations and commercial interests all wooed Japanese coal-buyers to their preferred port. Eventually Gladstone won out.

The building of the conveyor helped Gladstone become the terminal for Moura and other central Queensland coalmines. It changed the essential nature of the port from handling primary produce, mostly bound for the United Kingdom, to petroleum imports and mineral exports to Asia, particularly to Japan. As the petrochemical depot at Auckland Point expanded and the export trade demanded deeper docking facilities and better rail services there was more pressure for foreshore landfill.

The beginning of the boom in mineral exports was off set by the decline in the meat trade, as the meatworks aged, exports fell and killing seasons shortened. In 1963 the meatworks finally closed-some people went off to other meatworks, some

found work on the wharves and in the railway-dissatisfaction was rife.

Population figures for the period 1940 to 1963 for Gladstone and Calliope tell their own story-

1941: Gladstone 4973 people, Calliope 4866
 1952: Gladstone 5244 people, Calliope 3801
 1962: Gladstone 7181 people, Calliope 3553

The Boyne Valley population continued to decline as gold mines and their by-products dropped in value. Boyne Island and Tannum Sands remained farming/fishing communities, bolstered by families in search of a seaside holiday or a fishing weekend.

On the whole 1963 was a year of gloom-opinion varies as to whether folk were told of the imminent arrival of Queensland Alumina Ltd, the big saviour of the next decades. The general public seems not to have known with any certainty just what a huge tidal wave was about to hit the town.

Sue Pechey 2001



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