

The Star Amphitheatre Balmoral



Local Studies Service
Mosman Library



Mosman Council

The Star Amphitheatre



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The Star Amphitheatre was a Grecian Doric style structure built between 1923 and 1924 above Edwards Beach, at the northern end of Balmoral. It was a site described as having 'the best view from Balmoral Beach of the North Head of Sydney Harbour'.
(*Roe 1980, p104*).

The amphitheatre was designed by architects, J.E. Justelius & Son, and built by John Jamieson at a cost of 16,000 pounds. The architectural drawings showing the beach elevation indicate that it was three stories high, with the stage towering 21 metres (70 feet) above the beach. Underneath, at beach level, was a library, meeting halls, meditation and tea rooms. The Star Amphitheatre could seat 2000 people and had standing room for another 1000. The building was partly cut into the sandstone rock and partly constructed of concrete. (*Souter, 1994, p167*).

At the time the Mosman Daily described it at the time as a 'remarkable building of massive beauty'.

Why was it built?

There are many myths surrounding the purpose of the Star Amphitheatre, the most sensational, which is still made by some media today, was to witness the second coming of the messiah—walking on water through Sydney Heads!

It was built by The Order of the Star in the East, an offshoot of the international Theosophical Society, which had been formed in 1913 by Mrs Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater. In 1914 Leadbeater left the headquarters in Adyar, India to establish a Sydney community.

The Order of the Star in the East had been established to prepare the way for a new “world teacher” who would use the amphitheatre to address his audience. This teacher, Jiddu Krishnamurti had been found by Leadbeater as a young boy. He subsequently rejected this role as a messiah and only spoke there on one occasion.



Mary Rocke, a retired doctor, member of the Theosophical Society, secretary and physician to Leadbeater, purchased three adjacent blocks of land sloping from Wyargine Street, Balmoral to the beach. With a loan of 4,000 pounds and the rest of the cost raised by selling subscription seats, the Star Amphitheatre was built on this site.

The amphitheatre was described in the Theosophical publication *The Star* as 'a symbol in stone of that which our daily lives should be ...simple, pure, clean, dignified'. (Roe, 1980 p102).

Leadbeater 1915

Leadbeater was also the second Presiding Bishop in the Liberal Catholic Church. This church had been founded in Britain by Bishop J.I. Wedgwood in 1915 and was considered an esoteric church for the Theosophical Society.

The Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 by Mdm. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky growing out of spiritualism with influences from eastern religions and philosophies. It describes itself as a 'spiritual/religious/philosophical society' with 'members united by a common search and aspiration for truth in their lives, not by a common belief' (www.austheos.org.au). The Theosophical Society began in Australia in 1894 and is still active today. In 2001 an International Conference was held in Sydney attracting 1000 members from around the world.

Spiritualism was very popular in the early 20th century and membership included such people as the Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin and architect, Walter Burley Griffin.



Co-Freemasonry

In 1902 Annie Besant founded the first Co-Masonic order in London. This Movement had started in France in the late 19th century and was open to both men and women.

What happened to the Star Amphitheatre

In 1929 Krishnamurti, who succeeded Mrs Besant, dissolved the Order and the following year Leadbeater left Australia for a world tour. Leadbeater returned in 1934 only to pass away in Perth, the day after his arrival. The Star Amphitheatre was sold in 1931 to an entrepreneur, George (Humphrey?) Bishop, who used it for vaudeville and other live performances as well as installing a mini-golf course on the roof. After the Catholic Church bought the Amphitheatre in 1936 it fell into a state of disrepair. Oral history interviews in the Mosman Local Studies Collection bring to life memories of childhood games in the Amphitheatre. The Star Amphitheatre was demolished in 1951 by Urban Cooperative Multi Home Units No. 3 and replaced by a large block of 30 flats called *Stancliff*.

The Manor

William Bakewell arrived in Australia in the late 1860s with his brothers John and Thomas. Initially they worked as builders, bricklayers and contractors eventually establishing brickworks, Bakewell Brothers, in 1884 in Macdonaldtown, Sydney. The brickworks produced not only good quality bricks but a range of salt glazed, wheel-thrown and press moulded garden ornaments, chimney pots, pipes and industrial pottery. In 1891 they commenced production of a successful range of domestic ware. Bakewell Brothers remained in business until 1955.



The Manor c. 1920s

William had purchased land near Scone in the Hunter Valley and built *St Aubins* in 1885 and *Airlie House* in the 1890s. However, in 1904 he decided he had need of a house in Sydney so that his large family would have a place to gather. Purchasing six waterfront blocks in Margaret Street (later Iluka Road) in Clifton Gardens William started to build an eight-room house which by 1913 had become a 55 room mansion. No doubt, the fact that he owned brickworks allowed him this indulgence. William died in 1917 at the age of 67 and the house known by locals as *House of Dreams* or *Bakewell's Folly* was never used by his family remaining empty until 1922. We do not know the owner between 1917 and 1922 except the fact that they owned another house in the area.

In 1922 about 30 members of the Order of the Star in the East leased *Bakewell's Folly* calling it *The Manor*. In 1925 the Order purchased the mansion for 14,000 pounds. At the time there were a number of other houses in Mosman that were also used by members of this group. It was also at *The Manor* that the Order started the radio station 2GB. The station was named after Giordano Bruno, a 16th century philosopher who was burned at the stake and reincarnated as Mrs Annie Besant. In 1932 Sydney housewives voted it their favourite commercial radio station. (Souter, 1994 p169)

Today *The Manor* is owned by the Theosophical Society.

The Garden School



The Garden School

The Misses Lily Arnold and Jessie Macdonald ran three private schools which provided a theosophical education. The first in Stanmore was one of the earliest co-educational schools in Australia. After this closed, in 1918 they established the Morven Garden School at Gore Hill. In 1924 Morven closed which gave them the opportunity to open a Garden School in Glen Carron, Stanton Road, Mosman. Both women were members of The Order of the Star in the East. The purpose of this school was to provide an all round education that included eurhythmic dancing, tuition in Esperanto, camping and swimming. Among the many students were a young Peter Finch and Joan Hammond (Souter, 1994, p168).

Originally called *Tivoli*, the house had been built in 1893 by Ernest T.H. Rhode who was the stepfather of art collector and benefactor, S.H. Ervin. By 1904 the house was owned, or tenanted, by a Lionel Bridge, and had been renamed *Glen Carron*. The Garden School closed in 1936, the estate was subdivided and the house demolished.

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Also check the SHOROC catalogue for works on Jiddu Krishnamurti.
The Mosman Local Studies Collection vertical files on the Amphitheatre, the Manor and the Garden School.

Photographs

- Mosman Library Local Studies Photograph Collection at www.mosman.nsw.gov.au
National Library of Australia, Pictures Catalogue at www.nla.gov.au/apps/picturescatalogue

Other Sources

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- Balmoral self-guided heritage walk brochure indicates the site of the Star Amphitheatre
www.mosman.nsw.gov.au/planning/balmoral-selfguided-heritage-walk.pdf
- A play by Australia playwright, Hilary Bell "Conversations with Jesus", set in the present-day features the Amphitheatre and Balmoral Beach as the setting.
- The transcript of an interview about Jiddu Krishnamurti on ABC Radio National's Encounter Program, 15/12/2002, at www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s767134.htm.
- The Theosophical Society, Australia at www.laustheos.org.au



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