

DECISION OF 3744th COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 24 MAY 2021

8.19 Ben Boyd interpretative plaque

Report of Ian Hoskins, Council Historian

This report responds to the resolution of Council on 26 April 2021 requesting the drafting of a plaque interpreting the existing plaques commemorating Ben Boyd in Neutral Bay. Flamboyant colonial businessman Ben Boyd lived in Neutral Bay in the 1840s. Ben Boyd Road was named after him around 1880 and two plaques commemorating the 80th anniversary of his death installed beside the road in 1931. Both admired and criticised in his own life-time, Boyd's legacy is again in question because of his practice of using South Sea Islanders as cheap labour for his agricultural enterprises. This report provides background to Boyd's contested commemoration and provides text for a plaque/sign which will contextualise the existing plaques and thereby present a more fulsome history of the man. The plaque will cost less than \$1000.

Recommending:

1. THAT Council endorses the text suggested for the third interpretive plaque

The Recommendation was moved by Councillor Brodie and seconded by Councillor Barbour.

The Motion was put and **Carried**.

Voting was as follows:

For/Against 8/0

Councillor	Yes	No	Councillor	Yes	No
Gibson	Y		Barbour	Y	
Beregi	Absent		Drummond	Y	
Keen	Y		Gunning	Y	
Brodie	Y		Mutton	Y	
Carr	Y		Baker	Absent	

RESOLVED:

1. THAT Council endorses the text suggested for the third interpretive plaque

8.19. Ben Boyd interpretative plaque

AUTHOR: Ian Hoskins, Council Historian

ENDORSED BY: Rebecca Aukim, Acting Director Community and Library Services

ATTACHMENTS: Nil

PURPOSE:

This report responds to the resolution of Council on 26 April 2021 requesting the drafting of a plaque interpreting the existing plaques commemorating Ben Boyd in Neutral Bay.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Flamboyant colonial businessman Ben Boyd lived in Neutral Bay in the 1840s. Ben Boyd Road was named after him around 1880 and two plaques commemorating the 80th anniversary of his death installed beside the road in 1931. Both admired and criticised in his own life-time, Boyd's legacy is again in question because of his practice of using South Sea Islanders as cheap labour for his agricultural enterprises. This report provides background to Boyd's contested commemoration and provides text for a plaque/sign which will contextualise the existing plaques and thereby present a more fulsome history of the man.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

The plaque will cost less than \$1000.

RECOMMENDATION:

- 1. THAT** Council endorses the text suggested for the third interpretive plaque

LINK TO COMMUNITY STRATEGIC PLAN

The relationship with the Community Strategic Plan is as follows:

4. Our Social Vitality

4.4 North Sydney's history is preserved and recognised

5. Our Civic Leadership

5.3 Community is informed and consulted

BACKGROUND

Ben Boyd was a flamboyant Scottish entrepreneur who arrived in Sydney in 1842. He built the house called 'Craignathan' on the foreshore of Neutral Bay which served as a home, harbour headquarters and wool-washing facility. Boyd also acquired 1,000,000 acres of land in the Monaro region and established a whaling station on the adjacent south coast at Twofold Bay. He was an extravagant risk-taker whose business model was based, in part, upon owning the bank from which he borrowed – the Royal Bank of Australia - and impressing investors with the scale of his operations. Boydtown was established near the whaling station as a potential major coastal settlement. The south coast enterprises were serviced by Boyd's fleet of three steamers, at a time when such technology was still relatively new in the colony.

Boyd arrived shortly after the end of convict transportation. His quest for a replacement source of cheap labour led to the 'recruitment' of Pacific Islanders from present-day Vanuatu and New Caledonia. As his biographer has written: 'Boyd responded to the perceived problem of a shortage of labour with short-term solutions based purely on the profit motive'. (Diamond, 1988, pp.111-112)

Boyd employed Aboriginal people on his ships and at the south coast whaling station. By contrast the men 'recruited' from Vanuatu and New Caledonia in 1847 had had little contact with Europeans and knew little, if anything, of what they had agreed to by coming to New South Wales. As many as 200 were brought to the colony to work primarily on the Monaro sheep runs. They were provided with rations and, having arrived naked, two sets of clothes. Delivered to the south coast most refused to go to the sheep runs and found their way back to Sydney. Their contracts were deemed invalid with amendments to the *Master and Servants Act* in August 1847. By some accounts Boyd effectively abandoned the men. They were seen wandering around Neutral Bay from where they had originally embarked for the south coast, but their means of support is unclear. At least one man drowned trying to swim from Neutral Bay to one of Boyd's vessels, presumably in an attempt to return home.

The response of colonists to the arrival and subsequent plight of the Pacific islanders provides an insight into the moral climate of the time. One resident of Robertson's Point [Cremorne Point] spoke highly of the Islanders whom he met: 'I have witnessed nothing superior to them among our own people' (SMH, 15/12/1847). While that was undoubtedly a minority opinion, a great many disapproved of Boyd's labour practices. Some were concerned that the introduction of 'savages' to the colony set a precedent which threatened the immediate well-being of residents and long-term social stability of the place. Although the Islanders were never legally chattel, as were African Americans in the United States, others regarded his recruitment

technique as akin to slavery. That was the position taken by Boyd's most trenchant critic, the politician and lawyer Robert Lowe, as well as by missionaries who regarded such business dealings as representing the worst aspects of European contact, antithetical to their own attempts to Christianise and 'civilise'.

Boyd's enterprises collapsed and he left for the Californian goldfields leaving many creditors unpaid. Failing to add to his fortune there he returned west, anchored in the Solomon Islands and was killed by local people after venturing ashore. His death was reported widely. Responses reflected the mixed feelings he had elicited during his time in New South Wales. One writer in the Catholic-orientated *Freeman's Journal* referred to his 'kidnapping' of fellow human beings and suggested that Boyd had been dealt justice having transgressed God's 'Higher Law': do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Others thought Boyd had been harshly judged and eulogised him.

The practice of coercively recruiting Islanders was taken up by others in the 1860s to provide cheap labour for Queensland's newly established sugar industry. It became known as 'blackbirding' and comparisons were again made with slavery. Stories of violence at the hands of brutal ships' captains abounded. After 1868 attempts were made to regulate the practice. Contracts were formalised, ships were policed and islanders themselves were better able to negotiate the conditions of employment. Some went back and forth several times. Others started new permanent lives in Queensland. However, there remained a moral pall over the practice in the minds of many – particularly those associated with missionary churches. There was certainly widespread criticism of the deportation of Islanders to Melanesia and elsewhere following the passage of the Pacific Island Labourers Act in 1901 – one part of the establishment of White Australia.

Despite that opprobrium, Boyd's reputation seems not to have suffered in subsequent years. Ben Boyd Road, which was built through leased subdivisions of John Cooper's vast estate, first appears in the records of St Leonards Borough in 1883. Boyd's activities were enthusiastically discussed in the journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society, established in 1901. Its members were generally enthralled with the deeds of explorers, settlers and men of 'vision', such as Ben Boyd, who helped to 'make' the nation. It was probably Captain James Watson, a regular contributor to the Society's journal, who initiated the installation of the plaques at the bottom of Ben Boyd Road. He certainly spoke highly of Boyd at their unveiling in 1931 – the 80th anniversary of Boyd's death. One marble tablet with lead lettering was provided by the Society. A second concrete plaque with a pictorial relief was made - possibly by a Council employee - featuring Boyd's yacht *The Wanderer* with an account of his demise at the hands of 'cannibals'. Neither plaque referred to his 'blackbirding' activities. Council made available the site on a sandstone outcrop. In the 1960s or 1970s they were detached and set into a brick wall built to cover the rock and line the driveway of a new block of flats – No.6 Ben Boyd Road.

In 1992 Dr Faith Bandler wrote to North Sydney Council requesting that the name of Ben Boyd Road be changed because of his activities as a 'slave-trader'. Bandler was the daughter of a man who had been taken from Vanuatu in the 1880s and regarded himself as having been enslaved but avoided deportation in the early 1900s. She had risen to national prominence because of her work with the Aboriginal community in the successful 1967 Referendum on Aboriginal recognition in the census and the transfer of responsibility for indigenous affairs to the Commonwealth. In 1975 Bandler turned her attention to furthering the interests of her own

South Sea Islander community by co-founding a national organisation called Australian South Sea Islander United Council. South Sea Islanders were not represented in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC] formed in 1990 but their distinct identity was formally recognised by the Commonwealth in 1994. There are now as many as 60,000 people who claim descent from the South Sea Islanders brought to Australia to labour in the late 1800s.

Bandler's request to rename Ben Boyd Road was made public. Several local residents opposed the suggestion in letters to Council and the local press. The responses ranged from arguments against rewriting history to the insignificance of the issue, i.e. North Sydney Council should be dealing with more consequential matters. Council did not rename the road, but the suggestion was made to install another plaque outlining the history of Ben Boyd. This was never acted upon.

In 2020 both plaques were covered with plywood as precaution against vandalism because the Black Lives Matter debate in Australia had highlighted the contentious nature of commemorating Ben Boyd. At that time too consideration was given to the condition and location of the plaques. They were subsequently treated by International Conservation Services. The smaller marble plaque was cleaned and 're-lettered' in situ. That is, the lead lettering was repainted and where missing was replaced. The larger picture plaque was removed for treatment in the workshop.

That work created hostility and suspicion among some local residents who witnessed the on-site cleaning and removal. One contacted the media with the suggestion that Council intended to permanently remove the plaques to avoid controversies relating to Australia Day.

While the larger picture plaque was in the workshop it was decided to replicate it by means of silicone mould, both as a back-up in the event of damage to the original and to create an opportunity for further interpretation. The replica might be installed elsewhere with a memorial to the men who were taken by Ben Boyd.

Work is being finalised on the original plaque and it will be reinstalled in its original location as soon as possible.

CONSULTATION REQUIREMENTS

Community engagement is not required.

DETAIL

Ben Boyd was a controversial figure in his own lifetime. Memory of him still courts controversy. Today some see his contracting of South Sea Islanders as a form of slavery and question commemoration of the man. Others feel his association with Neutral Bay is a historical fact and to remove evidence of that is to attempt to rewrite or 'cancel' history. Reaction to the covering and temporary removal of the Ben Boyd Road plaques is evidence of a strong sense of attachment to his name and place within the community.

Council has never contemplated permanently removing the plaques from the public realm and it would be counterproductive to do so. A more appropriate way of responding to the sentiments Boyd's legacy provoke is to follow up the suggestion made when Faith Bandler questioned Boyd's commemoration in 1992 and place a third interpretative plaque near the original two, one which factually outlines his story and the roles he has occupied in Australian history from swashbuckling entrepreneur to slaver. Suggested text is as follows

Remembering Ben Boyd

Benjamin Boyd pioneered the coercive or duplicitous recruitment of labour from the Pacific islands known as 'blackbirding'. In 1847 he transported at least 200 men to work on his sheep runs in the Monaro region. Few, if any, knew what awaited them and most tried to return home. At least one man drowned after swimming from Neutral Bay, where Boyd lived, to the ship *Portenia*. Boyd's ventures failed and he left the colony with unpaid debts in 1849. 'Blackbirding' was revived in the 1860s to secure cheap labour for sugar plantations in north Queensland. Thousands of Islanders came to Australia. White Australia policies enacted in 1901 resulted in the deportation of many.

Boyd was controversial in his own time. The politician Robert Lowe equated his treatment of islanders with slavery. Over the following 80 years, however, Boyd was recast as a colonial visionary and swashbuckling entrepreneur. Ben Boyd Road was named around 1880. These two plaques were installed in 1931 by the Royal Australian Historical Society and North Sydney Council to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Boyd's death. The larger one is signed and dated 'ED 2/9/31'. Neither mentions his treatment of Islanders or the debts he left. Fifty years later Boyd's legacy was again being reassessed. Dr Faith Bandler AC, AM, whose father had been taken from Ambrym Island as a boy in the 1880s, questioned the appropriateness of the name Ben Boyd Road in 1992.

This plaque was installed in the context of the ongoing debate about the memory of Benjamin Boyd.

North Sydney Council 2021