

## Saltwater Sanctuary

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Photos: Wonthaggi & District Historical Society

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Locals used gut-buster drills and gelignite to carve Victoria's only man-made ocean rock pool.

AUSTRALIA has around 100 ocean pools, most of them in NSW. They provide safe, tidal flushed swimming sanctuaries. It seems the Cape Paterson rock pool is the only man-made ocean swimming pool in Victoria.

The rock pool was the brainchild of Alan Birt and Jack Cargill. Alan wanted a calmer swimming place for younger children. There was already a natural channel between the bay and a small rockpool. The existing small rockpool was also warmer in winter than the bay. So this was the site he chose.



Jack Cargill, left, and Allan Birt

From 1956 to 1963, with help from a local farmer (Ron Bolding, who owned the tractor), a young Frank Liddle and Jack Cargill (a Wonthaggi hairdresser), they excavated the larger rockpool. Regrettably the names of many other regular volunteers haven't been recorded.

The gelignite was “donated” by the Wonthaggi State Coal Mine, as were the iron slip rails. This allowed the coal skips to take out the rock materials, and this was dumped into Browns Bay (to the west).



The gut-buster drills were powered by an air compressor on wheels, hauled in by tractor

Hand-wound “gut buster” drills were used to make holes in the rock. The holes were then filled with explosives (sticks of gelignite), as Alan was highly experienced with explosives. After each blast the rock was removed by wheelbarrows and the coal skips. Three hundred tonnes of rock was removed.

No permits existed; there was no financial reward. The £35 donations collected (worth about \$1,200 today) were never used. The local Italians and Greeks did most of the concreting. The 3 tonnes of cement were donated by Melbourne visitors.

It took a staggering seven years to build because tides restricted work to one Sunday a fortnight, and this was further hampered by weather conditions.



Danny Carr, now 98½ years old, and living in North Wonthaggi, was one of the main engineers at the State Mine power house, which provided electricity for the mine. He designed an outlet valve under the pool wall on the bay side of the pool. It was a long threaded stainless steel rod attached to a stainless steel plate. This allowed them to drain the pool.

Annie Gilmour and Allan Birt taught hundreds of local children to swim in the pool during the post-war “how to swim” campaign. Allan even received a medal from Queen Elizabeth II for teaching so many children to swim.

Two laps of the pool got you the “Herald” certificate. When you could swim across the 50 metre bay, you got the “Junior” certificate. With these certificates you became a qualified lifesaver. High tides now regularly flush out the pool, occasionally trapping fish and even small sharks. They are trapped there until the next high tide releases them.



The pool originally included a diving board into open water but this was removed because the water was dangerously shallow for high diving!

The pool was built by local people, with no government help. There was mutual distrust and suspicion between the two, possibly left over from the 1930 miners’ strikes. Not only didn’t the miners ask permission – they didn’t ask for forgiveness.

The Wonthaggi mine closed on 21 December 1968 but the “can do” attitude can still be seen today. Many other mining towns died when the local mine closed.

Wonthaggi not only survived – it grew to become the thriving town we all love today. As for the rock pool, local kids still learn how to swim and snorkel in it.



SWIMMING IN NATURAL ROCK POOL, CAPE PATTERSON

Lastly, everyone likes a shaggy dog story – but Cape Paterson’s rockpool boasts a ripper. Early in its construction, Allan Birt explained that he needed to blast out a particularly large piece of the rock platform. He connected an extra long fuse and ordered the workers and onlookers to move 250 metres away - near the position of the present toilet block. The fuse was lit. Only then did the owner of the kiosk, Attilio Storti, notice that his dog Fido was standing on the rock about to be blasted. Attilio became hysterical and had to be held back.

### **BOOM!**

The rock was blasted into the air sending pieces of shrapnel as far as the onlookers. But more miraculously, the huge rock sailed through the air with Fido on top and landed in the bay. To everyone’s amazement, and Attilio’s delight, Fido was unharmed and swam ashore.

When I spoke to locals who were present at the pool’s construction, I was repeatedly asked if I’d heard about the dog. A true story!



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