

# CATHO CHRONICLE

CATHERINE HILL BAY PROGRESS ASSOCIATION

DEDICATED TO PRESERVING THE HERITAGE VALUES OF CATHO HILL BAY



## LOCAL LANDCARE LEGENDS

A successful year of Landcare was recently celebrated by over 80 volunteers and their supporters at the Landcare & Sustainable Living Centre, including presentation of the Lake Macquarie Environmental Excellence in Landcare (EEL) Awards.

The 'Soaring with the Eagles' award, which recognises an individual who has made a regionally significant contribution to excellence in Landcare, was won by local legend Carmel Brown, the dedicated Team Leader of Catherine Hill Bay Dunecare. Carmel's valuable contribution over the last 10 years spans all levels of involvement, from her work within her own group, to past chair at LML, and to membership of the Hunter Region Landcare Network committee.



Carmel Brown receiving the "Soaring with the Eagles' Award

SUMMER 2025 ISSUE...

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**COASTAL WALKWAY**

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**HERITAGE  
WALKING TOUR**

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**SURF SAFETY**

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**CATHO  
BOARDRIDERS  
TURNS 50!**

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**NEXT PA MEETING  
at Catho SLSC  
on date TBA**

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*Cover shot: Chillaxing in the Wallarah Rockpools*

*(photo courtesy of Jasmine Farlow @  
[www.theaustraliangypsy.com.au](http://www.theaustraliangypsy.com.au))*

## Local Landcare Legends (continued)

Wendy Heys and Jayne Gordon also received the distinguished 'Local Legend' Award at the November Landcare Event.

Carmel Brown stepped up to the role of Landcare Site Leader in Catherine Hill Bay in 2013. Under her guidance the group has been tireless in their efforts to address invasive weeds, planting native species, maintaining pathways, and looking after the cemetery heritage areas. Despite challenges such as harsh weather, erosion, vandalism of trees (for views and firewood), and fluctuating volunteer numbers, the team has remained resilient.



*Landcarers Wendy Heys and Jayne Gordon with Carmel Brown (centre)*



The recent awards are not the first time the local Landcare team has been honoured; they were previously recognised in 2018 when CHB Landcare received the Long-Standing Group Award at the Annual EEL Awards. Jann Kinsela, Clarita Norman and Lindsey and Dave Goff (pictured left) were also honoured as 'Local Legends' for their commitment to Landcare, which has extended to Clean Up Australia events and National Tree Planting Days.

All today's members, including long-time contributors and newer faces, continue the work with a passion that has defined this remarkable community effort. For anyone who wants to join in to protect and preserve our natural heritage, monthly Landcare sessions resume in Autumn on:

- Monday 3rd March from 3-5pm at the Catho north-end site (first Monday of the month), and
- Thursday 20th March from 3-5pm at the south-end site (third Thursday of the month).

Feel free to contact Carmel on 0438 499636 for more information, and look out for our interview with her in a future issue of the Chronicle.

## Catho Coastal Walkway

As reported in our previous issue, some exciting news for our town is that Rose Group has begun construction of the southern headland section of the Catho Coastal Walkway, adjacent to the former Bin Building.

In addition, they are developing the final designs for a further section of the walkway extending north to the Catho SLSC, crossing NPWS land. Lake Macquarie City Council (LMCC) has been working with NPWS and Rose Group to establish an easement in favour of Council to enable delivery of this section. It's a more complex design which includes a staircase, and currently there's no firm timeframe for completion.

## Catho Coastal Walkway (continued)

These works form a segment of the larger Catho Coastal Walkway project which, when complete, will extend for over 3km from Middle Camp in the north to Moonee Beach in the south. Much of it will follow the route of the old mine railway line. As well as breathtaking views, the walk will include heritage signage describing the rich history of the mining town.



*Catho Coastal Walkway under construction on the southern headland*

The walkway project will be implemented in stages, with the southern section currently being constructed by Rose Group as part of *Beaches Stage 3*, the middle section to be constructed by LMCC as part of their Recreational Master Plan, and the northern section by Hunter Group as part of their *Catherine Hill* residential development.

Related to this, LMCC has reported they are continuing to progress the detailed design for the Community Hub on the Bowling Club site, which forms Stage One of their Recreational Master Plan. This will include connecting pathways to the coastal walkway at Graveyard Beach.

Rose Group reports that the Village Park works are due to be completed in the first quarter of 2025. The Progress Association and the CHB Alliance have been in discussions about hosting a joint opening ceremony for the Village Park, ideally with a ribbon cutting event by local dignitaries, and also a community picnic. Enquiries are currently being made with key stakeholders to progress this idea. Further updates on this will be provided in due course.

## Heritage Precinct Walking Tour

On a warm spring afternoon in November, the Progress Association hosted a heritage house walk visiting a number of houses in the heritage village. Each house visit was hosted by the current owner and different aspects of the history of the buildings, the adaptive use, and commentary on life in the Bay were covered.

The tour started at the old RSL in Northwood Road, where we were treated to a viewing of part of the movie *Summer City* starring a very young Mel Gibson and Steve Bisley. The RSL hall was used in the filming (refer [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summer\\_City](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summer_City)).

## Heritage Precinct Walking Tour (continued)

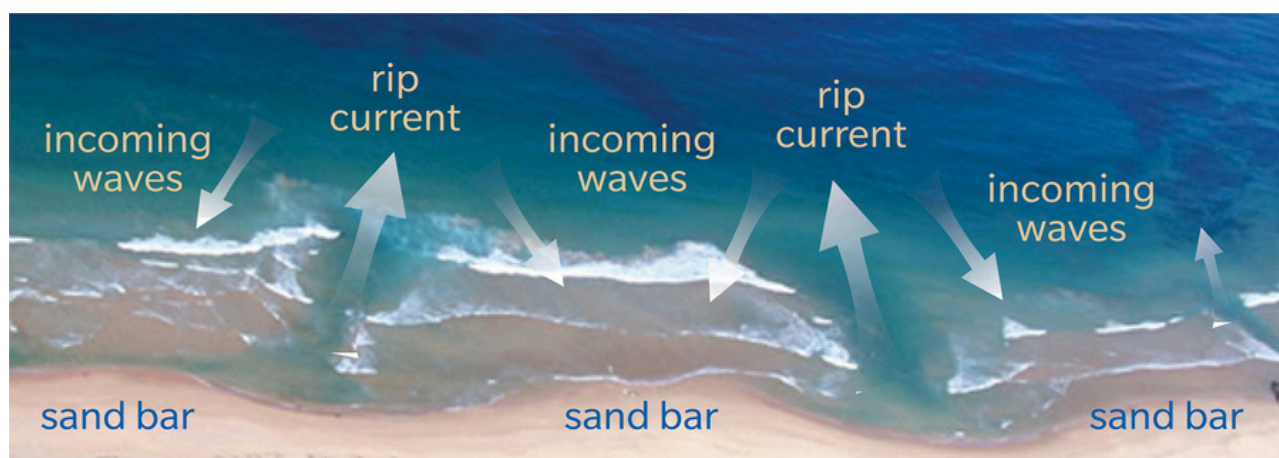


Attendees then visited houses in Flowers Drive and the extensive grounds of the former school in Flowers Drive, before heading up to Main Camp to visit the old maternity hospital and several houses in Clarke Street. The last port of call was the old police lock up at the back of the former police station opposite the pub. A home cooked afternoon tea overlooking the beach completed the event.

The attendees comprised Catho residents and people from Belmont, Valentine and other local areas, including one former resident who was born here and had some great anecdotes to add to the proceedings. All said they thoroughly enjoyed the day. A common theme in the commentary from the owners of the cottages was that they felt as if they were custodians of their houses rather than owners. This was totally unscripted and a wonderful testament to our Heritage Catho owners. Given the success of the day, the PA is considering making this an annual event.

## How to spot a rip

A rip is a water current that can occur near beaches with breaking waves. It is a strong, localised, narrow current of water which moves away from the shore like a river running out to sea. As water is pushed into the shore by the waves, rips are where all that extra water goes back out to sea.



People often get into difficulty with rips as they can appear to be the calmest part of the ocean for swimming. However, rips are dangerous and inexperienced swimmers can get in serious trouble if caught in one, particularly if panic sets in.

## How to spot a rip (continued)

The four main characteristics to look for to identify a rip are:

- Darker water ('green is mean!'),
- Fewer breaking waves,
- Rippled water surface,
- There may be items floating on the surface out beyond the breaking waves.

The best way to avoid getting caught in a rip is:

- Always swim at a patrolled beach,
- Swim between the red and yellow flags,
- If you are not a strong swimmer then stay in the shallows,
- Talk to the lifeguards if you have any questions before going in the water.

If you get caught in a rip:

- Try to relax (as rip currents don't pull you under),
- Don't try to swim directly against the current,
- Swim parallel to the shore instead, then swim back in once out of the rip,
- If you can't get out of the rip, float or tread water (as rips eventually stop beyond the breaking waves),
- Raise your arm and wave for assistance.



## Did you know ...

... that the **Catherine Hill Bay Boardriders Club** recently celebrated 50 years since its inauguration?

The Chronicle caught up with Mick McCall, one of the founding members and president of the club from 1979 to 2019. He had some fascinating stories about the history of the club and surfing in Catherine Hill Bay. Here's the conversation:

### **Hi Mick, congratulation on fifty years of the Boardriders. When did you first start surfing in Catho?**

It was the late sixties. I was living in a tin shack up in Slack Alley with some mates. Squatting, actually. Good times. Wild times. Later on the mine company was good enough to put power on for us. Then around '72 or '73 I moved to Lindsley Street in a corrugated iron shed behind the McKenzie's house. Number 13.

### **Wow, Catho would've been a real mining town back then ...**

Oh yeah. I remember Mr McKenzie (aka 'Weso') picking away at a coal heap in the backyard to heat the house. And because the pit had a stockpile of coal tailings up where the new estate is, everyone knew to bring their washing in before a southerly hit otherwise your clothes would be covered in coal dust.

**Ha! Amazing. Can you tell us about the beginning of the Catho Boardriders Club?**

It was in 1974. There were four founding members; Phil Davies, Ed Wotherspoon, Steve Foreman and myself. Phil was the first president (1974 to 1979) and the best surfer in Catho back then. Goofy footer, a born and bred Catho local. Ed was the son of Ted and Dorothy Wotherspoon, who ran the Catho Pub (the first Indigenous publicans in Australia). Ed was also a great surfer. Steve Foreman was son of the Undermanager of the mine and lived in Colliery Road. He went on to become a really successful surf coach, coaching world champions like Layne Beachley and Pauline Menczer.

**Can you recall the first club competition?**

Yep, like it was yesterday. August 1974. The surf was too big at Graveyard so we went to Crabbs Creek (a surfing reef near Swansea Heads). The waves were huge; 12 to 15 feet. 46 surfers turned up and 21 went out. It was bedlam because there were no legropes back then. One guy nearly drowned, washed around to the next beach. I lost my board after my second wave and spent 45 minutes trying to get back to shore. There's a rip at Crabbs that drags you nearly to Moon Island. From then on we've had contests at the Nth End of Catho. Only occasionally at the South End. Very occasionally at Moonee. We can't do it at Moonee nowadays because there's no vehicle access. Back then we used to get a car down to the end of the point where John Stewart lived in his miner's shack.



*Steve Foreman with world champion surfers Pauline Menczer and Layne Beachley*

**These are the regular club competitions, right? But you also have the big annual event called the Catho Classic. When did that start?**

The first Catho Classic happened five years after the club formed, in 1979. It was called the Brad Drummond Memorial Contest back then. As the event grew we changed the name to the Catho Classic around '83 or '84. This year is the 46th event and will happen at Graveyard unless there's a reason to move it. Scheduled for the weekend of the 5-6th April.

**Who have been some of the standout surfers over the years?**

Wow, where do I start? There's been so many. There's Terry Campbell, a champion surfer breaking all sorts of high scoring club records but never in the box seat for Club Champion. Wow, could he surf! Justin Lee, a life member who won eight club championships, and his son Connor. Scott Myers, the current president and Over 40s Australian Title winner. Glen Valaire, four times Club Champion. Jed Cooke, the Over 55s Australian Title winner. Dwayne Drinkwater, Matt Hucker, Paul Parkes, Christian McCall, Club Champion for four straight years from 1995 to 1998. Andy Brinkworth. Also not to forget the Moore family including Josh, Todd and Aaron and the new generations.

**Do you think the surf or coastline has changed over the decades?**

Not at Graveyard. It's still one of the most consistent waves around. But I've seen a lot of change at the south end of Catho. The movement of the coal ships used to create great sandbanks around the jetty, especially on the far (south) side of it.

**Really? I've never seen surfable waves on the south side of the jetty.**

Yeah, it was a great lefthander. You could take off and get tubed straight away and then flick out. We used to surf through the jetty too, between the pylons. Back then they had lights on the jetty so we used to surf under it until 10pm. It was risky going through the pylons, but fortunately none of my mates (or me) hit one. Maybe scraped an arm on the barnacles, but that's about it.

I was the last one to surf that lefthander through the pylons on the evening before the Sygna storm hit (May '74). That's when the jetty was destroyed. I'll never forget it because I could see a big storm was brewing.

**That was the old timber jetty, right? Before the steel one we have now?**

Yeah. The next morning the wreckage was strewn all along the beach. There used to be a rescue boat mounted on the end of the jetty and we found that right up at Graveyard.



*Catho Boardriders at Graveyard Beach in the 80s, with Mick McCall on the far left. Phil 'Hoss' Davies is back row, 4th from the right*

**So what about Moonee Beach? Has that changed much?**

Not so much the surf, but otherwise it's changed enormously.

In the 70s and 80s you could drive down there. It became popular for camping and got out of control. Up to 400 cars there sometimes, and lots of them leaving their rubbish behind. It became a cesspool, so the mine ended up closing it off to the public. We did a big clean up and collected sixty odd truckloads of rubbish and a lot of old car bodies too.

For many years after that it was a long, long walk down to Moonee and Ghosties. As I got older I hated that hill walking back home, especially if I'd been surfing down at Ghosties. I called it heartbreak hill. Then when Rose Group came along with their development plans, they promised us a big car park at Moonee. Thirty cars. But then after the massive 'Save Catho' protests they turned against the community and removed the car park from their plans. Now we've got nothing, just curbside parking for seven cars. And now even that's collapsed into a sinkhole.

**On the topic of changing coastline, why do you think Blacksmiths Breakwall doesn't get waves anymore? It used to be like a point break and had a thriving surf community that revolved around it. Mark Richards (four times world surfing champion) even learned to surf there.**

Yeah, it's breaks my heart to go to Blacksmiths nowadays. I remember catching waves from way out past the end of the breakwall - in the channel pretty much - and riding them through to the front of the surf club.

When they extended the breakwall in the 1980s it changed the sand flows. Nowadays the sand - instead of coming in and wrapping round - goes further out now and it settles too far out. They need to go ahead with the idea of transferring the sand from dredging the channel and dumping it at Blacksmiths. If they did that it could turn it into something like the Superbank on the Gold Coast.

**I think they're planning to have permanent dredging of the channel ...**

That's right, and they're gonna put it out in the ocean where it's going to do some good. Similar to what they did at the Gold Coast, transferring the sand across the Tweed River so it washes its way around to Duranbah, Snapper, Rainbow Bay, Greenmount Point and then across to Kirra. People come from all over the world to surf that place. It has the potential for the same thing here because, as you said, Blacksmiths used to be a point break.

**Have you ever had any interesting encounters with marine life?**

I had a shark cruise under me once. I didn't stick around to identify it. It was probably from here to the wall (3-4m), black or dark grey. It had to be a shark. I pretty well s\*\*t myself and went straight in. Then there was another time, when I was in my 50s, I used to do a dawn patrol before work. I hit the water about quarter to 5am, and I'm paddled out and it's still dark and my hand hits something in the water. Wait, what's that? When I finally got out the back I sat up on my board all alone and realised there's a school of salmon all around me! And of course, you know what's chasing them fish; the big fella in the grey flannel suit. I don't wanna get accidentally eaten so I caught the next wave straight in.

**Yep, I'd have done the same! So you stepped down from the presidency in 2019 after an extraordinary 40 years at the helm. Are you still involved with the club?**

I'm still involved, but to a lesser degree nowadays. The leadership is now in the capable hands of Scott Myers (President) and Josh Moore (Vice President). But I'm very, very proud of Catho Boardriders and I'll do just about anything for them.

I'm heavily involved with Surfest now (a major surf event in Newcastle), so sometimes I miss a Catho club comp because of commitments with Surfest. I'm part of the crew there. I can be a cook, a commentator, a priority judge, a beach marshall, tallier and more. I love it! It's in June this year as part of the World Challenger Series.



*A recent Boardriders event at the Catho Pub*



### **How can new people get involved with the Catho Boardriders?**

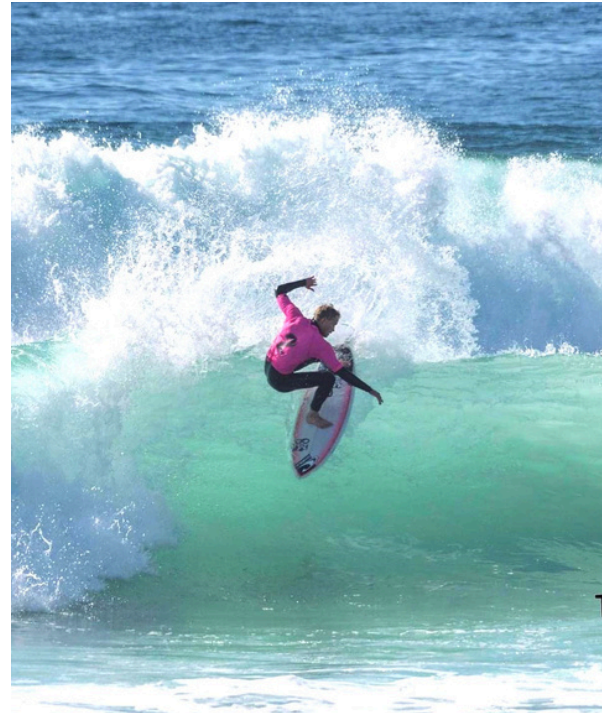
Just turn up at the next club comp at Graveyard Beach. The next one is on Saturday 1st February starting from 7am, or the one after that is Saturday 1st March. Also keep an eye on the Catho Boardriders Facebook page for any updates on events.

The monthly club comps are meant to be a real family day. Mum and dad and the kids can all join in. The surfing will go ahead unless it's flat or life threatening. Event categories are over 60s, over 50s, over 40s, over 30s, open mens and womens, juniors, cadets, and the micros (small groms getting pushed on the waves). It can be as competitive or as fun as you want to make it. We also have an annual trip away to the South Coast (Aug-Sept) and an annual presentation event at the Catho SLSC on the second Sunday in December.

**Thanks Mick. I really appreciate your time to come and chat.**

No worries. Thanks very much.

*For more information about the club and its activities, you can visit their Facebook page shown at the bottom of the page.*



*Current Club Champion, Will Smith, competing at Graveyard Beach*

## How to become a PA member

Would you like to become a member or friend of the CHB Progress Association?

The annual membership fee is \$20, or \$10 for pensioners. The membership form is attached to this newsletter email. Please email membership forms to [accounts@catherinehillbay.org.au](mailto:accounts@catherinehillbay.org.au). Thank you to all our members and friends that have already renewed their payments.

To join the Catho Chronicle mailing list, please email us at [newsletter@catherinehillbay.org.au](mailto:newsletter@catherinehillbay.org.au)

**For more local news check the following links:**

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[www.facebook.com/CathHillBayLandcare](https://www.facebook.com/CathHillBayLandcare)

[www.chbcommunityalliance.org](http://www.chbcommunityalliance.org)

**and the various other Facebook pages related to Catho:**

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[www.facebook.com/cathoboardriders](https://www.facebook.com/cathoboardriders)

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