Gold Coast histories

The Gold Coast has a unique and diverse cultural heritage, shaped by Indigenous ownership, European settlement of the hinterland, followed by waves of arrivals from around the world and eventual development of the coastal strip.

Unearth the past that has shaped our present as we dig through the layers of the city’s rich history. This snapshot of Gold Coast history provides historical information about its indigenous origins, our suburbs, local government, personal stories, and other insights into how our city has developed and evolved into the vibrant, cosmopolitan place it is today.

Select from the headings below to read more about our fascinating history.

Before European settlement

The city of the Gold Coast is bounded to the east by the sea, stretching from the Albert River in the north to the New South Wales border in the south, and west to the coastal mountains.

Before European settlement, the Gold Coast and hinterland was a natural area of timbered mountains and hills, river valleys, floodplain, salt and freshwater wetlands. Low sand hills and long white beaches marked the place where the land finally met the waters of the Pacific Ocean. The land, rivers, the sea, the flora and fauna all formed the home of the Yugambeh people. They lived as family clans generally in the river valleys and estuaries of the region.

The Yugambeh named localities and early European surveyors and settlers documented these place names. Some of these place names such as Nerang and Coombabah are familiar today. Much has changed, but descendants of the Aboriginal people still live on the Gold Coast.

Timber, cattle and farms

The first Europeans visiting the area for any extended period were timber getters looking for valuable cedar to cut and ship south to the developing city of Sydney or north to the convict settlement of Brisbane.

When the convict settlement closed and the population of Brisbane settlers grew, the first large cattle stations were established in the river valleys of the future Gold Coast. Eventually these properties were divided into smaller sugar and cotton farms, later dairy farms. The first township in the region, Nerang, was surveyed in 1865.

Seaside resort

At first, no one was interested in the fine surf beaches of the region. It was not good agricultural land and only poor timber grew there. By the end of the 19th Century though, Brisbane people wanted to escape the summer heat, travel down the waterways of Moreton Bay by boat and spend time at the seaside. A Governor of Queensland, Governor Musgrave, built a seaside home near Southport in 1885, setting a trend for the coast becoming a fashionable resort for the wealthy and influential.

People would travel in horse and coach along bush tracks, crossing the rivers by ferry and then ride along the beach at low tide. In 1889, a train line was extended from Brisbane to Southport, later extending down to Coolangatta. A number of guesthouses and hotels were built at scenic spots along the beach.

Motor cars and a coast road
The railway had brought many visitors to the region either to live permanently or as visitors, but motor cars and road access would change the pace of life here forever. A new coastal road, linking Brisbane to the beaches of the coast was completed in 1925.

In 1925, Jim Cavill built the Surfers Paradise Hotel near a beautiful surf beach. In 1933, the town which had grown up around the hotel was named Surfers Paradise. Motor cars brought more people to the coast and the string of small beach towns formed stretching from Labrador to Coolangatta.

The 1940s

These seaside towns became an ‘R&R’ haven for the thousands of Australian and Allied armed forces during World War II who introduced nylon, milk bars and jazz music to local culture. In 1949, all the beach towns along the coast were joined to become the Town of the Gold Coast under one local town council. While the name was used to describe a real estate boom, it also represented the golden sand, sunshine and the healthy living for which the area was famous.

Why was it called the Gold Coast?

In the late 1940s, Brisbane journalists called the coast, south of Brisbane, “the Gold Coast” - it was the place to buy and sell land in the post-war real estate boom. The local council thought that it was a good promotional name and on 23 October 1958, the South Coast Town Council adopted the name Gold Coast Town Council.

Officially, the Queensland State Government proclaimed the Local Authority of the city of the Gold Coast on 16 May 1959. The Place Names Board of Queensland officially gazetted the place name in April 1980.

The 1950s and 1960s

With peace came prosperity, with more and more people holidaying or settling by the sea. In the late 1950s and 60s, the development of the city’s beach strip was rapid. From Southport to Coolangatta, holiday houses, serviced holiday apartments, motels and shopping arcades were built to secure the Gold Coast’s place as a major holiday destination, becoming known for its relaxed, fun and glamorous lifestyle.

The canal estates of Paradise Island, Chevron Island and Isle of Capri were some of the first modern major land developments. Recent developments such as Q1 and Oracle continue a history of innovative high-rise development that began with the Queensland heritage-listed Kinkabool development at Surfers Paradise in 1959.

The Gold Coast - a Queensland Icon

In 2005, the Gold Coast was recognised as representing an important part of Queensland’s history and cultural heritage, and given icon status by the National Trust.

The changing size and shape of the city
In 1995, the Gold Coast was amalgamated with the hinterland and northern areas of the Albert Shire Council to form today’s Gold Coast City.

As a result of the Queensland Government’s local government reform, those suburbs north of the Albert River became part of Logan City on 15 March 2008. The suburbs which transferred to Logan City include Bahrs Scrub, Bannockburn, Bethania, Beenleigh, Edens Landing, Eagleby, Holmview, Mt Warren Park, Windaroo and Wolfdene.

Related information

- Council history
- Gold Coast Local Heritage Register
- Heritage walks and trails
- History and heritage resources (educational, museums and local history groups, image galleries)
- History of our suburbs

Jump to key information

Key information

External links

- City of Gold Coast Libraries - Gold Coast history