Surfers Paradise history

Jim Cavill and Surfers Paradise

Around 1920, Brisbane hotelier, Jim Cavill, acquired twenty-five acres (10 hectares) of land in an area known as Elston - the place we know now as Surfers Paradise.

The name Jim Cavill is always connected with the history of Surfers Paradise. However, to understand the full story, we need to first look back at an earlier age.

Farming days

In 1869, James Beattie was one of many first selectors or farmers to travel down to the south coast and hinterland. Beattie settled south of an area which the Kombumerri people called Jarri Parlia (today's Narrowneck). He selected 80 acres on the northern bank of the Nerang River.

The location of his farm was not far from the future Cavill Avenue. Beattie built a single-roomed cottage, a barn for his produce and a jetty on the river bank. Around him, farmers were just barely surviving on their farms or selections, growing crops such as maize and sugar cane.

Meyers Ferry

A German immigrant called Johann Meyer acquired Beattie's land in 1877. He developed a short-lived sugar plantation and mill on the property.

Meyer quickly found, as many would in the future, that there was money to be made in providing accommodation and services to visitors and travellers.

He built a private ferry service over the Nerang River as well as the Main Beach Hotel near the river bank in 1887. He financed his new ventures by selling at auction in Brisbane, The Main Beach Estate.

A Brisbane syndicate subdivided the land and named the newly surveyed streets (sandy tracks) after world champion scullers of the day: Edward Hanlan, Edward Trickett, Elias Laycock and Thomas Clifford. The remainder of the sugar plantation was auctioned as the Newhaven Estate in 1888.

Visitors and travellers

By 1888, a horse and coach service was operating from Southport three times a week.

The coach crossed the Nerang River at Meyers Ferry and then travelled along the beach. Johann Meyer's family operated a horse and buggy service from the Southport hotels, offering visitors a pleasure trip to the Main Surf Beach.

In 1889, Meyer's Main Beach Hotel was declared a postal receiving office, officially titled Elston. A postal address meant an official place name and a mark on the map. People would still refer to the place for a long time as Meyer's Ferry.

A village called Elston

The Postmaster in Southport, a Mr. Palmer, named the receiving office near the surf beach after his wife's home village in Nottinghamshire, England. By the 1890s, the first entrepreneur of the area, Johann Meyer faced financial ruin and, after he died in 1901, the Main Beach Hotel licence lapsed.

Elston was without a hotel until Jim Cavill built the Surfers Paradise Hotel in 1925.

Second land auction

As early as 1917, a Brisbane real estate company, Arthur Blackwood Ltd, offered for sale the Surfers Paradise Estate.

The auction was unsuccessful, partly because access to the area was still difficult. It was a great promotional name though and, in Jim Cavill's day, he lobbied strongly to have the name Elston changed to Surfers Paradise.

Opening the Jubilee Bridge and building the South Coast Road

The nearest railway station to Elston was located over the unbridged Nerang River at the town of Southport. The opening of the Jubilee Bridge in 1925 (celebrating 50 years since the first auction of land at Southport in 1875) and the extension of the South Coast Road brought a revolution to the south coast.

Motor cars could now travel along a road which bordered the seaside villages of Elston and Burleigh Heads.

Estates such as Ocean Wave, Northcliffe, Mermaid Beach and Miami Shores were promoted as sure fire investments. Investors and visitors needed a place to stay on the coast and in 1925, three hotels, the Surfers Paradise, the Miami and the Burleigh Heads Hotel opened to take advantage of a tourist boom.

Surfers Paradise

In 1925, at a relatively isolated spot near a long white surf beach, Jim Cavill opened his 16 bedroom hotel at the intersection of the South Coast Road and the old coach track which ran from Meyers Ferry to the beach.
Around the hotel, the township of Elston came to life as local people reopened the post office, and provided refreshments and facilities for campers and holiday-makers. A man with a keen eye for promotion, Jim Cavill, with the support of locals, lobbied hard until the place name Elston was changed to the more glamorous Surfers Paradise in 1933.

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Related information
- Gold Coast histories
- Gold Coast Local Heritage Register

Key information

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