

# Semaphore

## Echoes of the past – beacon of the future

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
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Way back in 1944, a young girl and her friends were peddling over the Birkenhead Bridge in great anticipation of an ice cream and a dip in the waters of nearby Semaphore. Without warning, Pamela Inglis plummeted on her bike some 20 feet below. A fault had triggered the bridge opening mechanism, normally reserved for when tall ships cruise along the Port River.



A family vigil saw Pamela fully recover from a coma, and a government enquiry which emblazoned the press pages for months ensured the bridge's smooth operation to this day.

Pamela, a paternal cousin, now lives in Sydney, but whenever visiting Adelaide, she relishes a trip to Semaphore with its marble-white sand, temperate gulf waters and laid-back, almost Bohemian life style.

Strolling around the precinct with my unofficial tour guide, local resident Chris Egerton, we were spotted by a local homeopath, Julia Tuohig. She related how a friend from interstate had dared her to join her shopping in their pyjamas. It confirmed their belief that Semaphore takes everything in its stride.

Unfussed and diverse it may be, but it is no hick town. Semaphore

and adjoining Port Adelaide is rapidly becoming a Mecca for artists, writers and even spiritualists who seek a stimulating but unpretentious atmosphere.

So, what is drawing people to Semaphore anew? While the beach may not be one of the great vistas of the world, it has a certain charm. Stretched along Le Fevre Peninsula, the road verges of succulent shrubbery and reedy vegetation harbour an array of bird life, while the dunes roll down to the pristine white sands and clear water.

Then there is the sheer concentration of history in this peninsula, framed by the Port River and the swampy West Lakes (now partially drained and a domicile for celebrities and *nouveau riches*) to the east, with St Vincent's Gulf to the west.

George Coppin, the 'Father of Australian theatre', erected a hotel in 1849 near what is now The Esplanade, and gave the area its name. It then abounded with wildlife and was occupied by the Kurna people. Many of their descendants live in the district, some reaching hero status with the Port Adelaide football club.

Numerous landmarks dot the townscape and bear testament to its

Left > The Urban Peasant occupying the former Baptist Church in Semaphore Rd

Below left > Largs Pier Hotel, an Italianate building reminiscent of the Coliseum in Rome

below right > Steam train 'Bill' with driver Brian Potts





rich maritime and leisure resort history. The impressive Time Ball Tower, built in 1875 and known as the 'sentinel of Semaphore' was superseded along with the signal tower by wireless telegraphy in the 1930s, but has been restored, with the time ball dropping every day at 1pm. The octagonal water tower is now converted to heritage apartments.

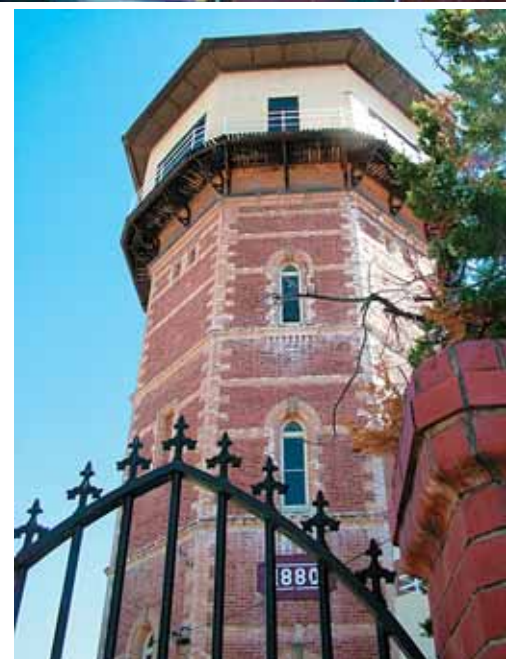
Hotels such as the Federation Hotel—with its ornate staircase, wide balconies and beautiful lead light windows—whose owners have so far thankfully resisted the trend of gutting all vestiges of history, reflect a prosperous past. From the 1880s to the roaring 20s, Semaphore was an entertainment paradise, with its jetty baths, Wondergraph open air cinema, ketch races, re-enactments of naval battles and a general spirit of revelry.

Various jewels from this glorious period are being revived. Rising from behind the sand dunes like a Singaporean Raffles or a Caliphate in the Saharan sands is the gleaming white Maris Palais, built in 1922. Now a popular bar, bistro and function centre, surrounded by palms in the balmy summer air, it harks back to the era of the British Raj or the dance hall frenzy of the roaring twenties. A photograph of 'Mollie Hurley, Queen of Foreshore, and attendants, 1936' captures the grandeur of the era. Semaphore descended into a prolonged period of decline soon afterwards.

The building now housing the local library, with a chequered history as Mechanics Institute, Town Hall and later a cinema, is adorned with frescoes, moulded panels and lattice windows. The surviving Semaphore Ozone, once grandly named the Wondergraph Picture Palace, has screenings for just \$6.

While Semaphore Road is no longer the mile of antiques shops it was in the late 80s, new art and antique establishments are springing up. The Urban Peasant in a former Baptist Church, still with its magnificent pipe organ, is the eclectic collector's dream. Exquisite clothes drape fabulous mannequins from the 60s and earlier. The owner Gloria, who also runs a holiday resort in Bali with her husband, brings a definite Asian influence with statuary, religious artefacts and jewellery abounding. Her daughter Alana Day continues the tradition with great panache and with much of the Urban Peasant stock at Sumadi, diagonally opposite.

Antique shops worth a visit are Acworth's Antiques, Hoff's Furniture Mart and Furniture by the Sea. Not to be missed are Maggie Auctions run by the affable Brian Graham at nearby Largs Bay opposite the Red Geranium and Mrs Fox Salvage. Christine of Sea Witch in Lipson Street over at the Port has a magnificent collection of photographic reproductions of early Semaphore and Port Adelaide.



Top left > Angel atop the war memorial near Jetty and Esplanade side shows

Top right > Merry-go-round, the largest vintage carousel in Australia, built in 1928

Above > The 1880 Water Tower is now converted into apartments

Arty shops are springing up continuously. Richardson's has elegantly fashioned gemstone rings, while the Semaphore Pantry makes a mean lemon ginger cordial and other speciality products. Whether it be a tattoo parlour, old style confectionery shops or other disappearing traditional Aussie fare, or just friendly cafes, Semaphore Road has it. Soto's, a fish and chip shop since 1961, and the Semaphore Bakeshop



Above left > Mollie Hurley, Queen of Foreshore, and attendants, 1936'



Above centre > Angel atop the World War I war memorial, with summer fairground



Above right > ??

Below > Semaphore's Time Ball Tower

Bottom > Fishing and paddling at sunset, Semaphore Jetty



with its home-style lamingtons give that real sense of continuity.

The sideshow alley along the foreshore captures the imagination of day trippers. The magic of the 1928 merry-go-round, the revolving clowns and other amusements, is coupled with the joys of taking a ride on 'Bill' the steam engine, faithfully tended and driven by Brian Potts along the foreshore towards historic Fort Glanville, an operational museum with troopers in full dress regalia and cannon firing.

Adelaide TV news reader Kevin Crease once organised a massive sandcastle competition and treasure hunt, inviting 'the fastest woman in the world' at the time (Marjorie Jackson, now governor of South Australia) to attend. The event burgeoned out of all

proportion and required some emergency last minute arrangements to accommodate the record numbers of unexpected participants but, he says, that on that day 'Semaphore was the best place in the world.'

According to my father, who dealt with clients all over the state and Broken Hill, families from there thought of Semaphore as their paradise as well. Descending like a huge flock of migratory birds each summer, he would meet large numbers of his Silver City clients at Semaphore, where they stayed at Fort Glanville caravan park.

Strolling along the jetty with its dangling fishing lines and crab nets being cast to the surf, amid squeals of delight from children on the rides, I came across a group of young Vietnamese Australian men and women playing a game of cards purely for fun. It brought me back to a more innocent time when people just whiled away the time using their own devices, not expecting to be entertained at all times.

A brilliant tangerine sunset was beginning to silhouette the convivial jetty. The white marble angel atop the war memorial enveloped in its glow seemed to smile down at the contented throng. Semaphore, lights aglow in the dusk, is coming back to life again. Let's hope historic Hart's Mill (under threat of demolition) other landmarks and the unique culture of this diverse community remain for all to enjoy, ever evolving.

