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Welcome to the Brighton Bathing Boxes

For many years in the late nineteenth century, Brighton was Melbourne's favourite seaside destination. Brighton is located in the City of Bayside, which has 17 km of foreshore to Port Phillip Bay. Nestled on Dendy Street Beach, the Brighton bathing boxes are a popular Bayside icon and cultural asset.

Bathing boxes and boatsheds are intrinsic to Port Phillip Bay and Western Port. Much has been written about Victorian morality and its impact on how people went about bathing and enjoying the seashore. As a result of this morality bathing boxes had their origins not only in Australia but concurrently on the beaches of England, France and Italy. European bathing boxes exist to this day.

The 82 Brighton bathing boxes are unique because of their uniform scale and proportion, building materials, sentry order alignment and a Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay on a beach owned by Bayside City Council. As simple structures, all retain classic Victorian architectural features with timber framing, weatherboards and corrugated iron roofs. They remain as they did over one hundred years ago, as licensed bathing boxes. No service amenities such as electricity or water are connected.

Although approximately 1,860 bathing boxes, boatsheds and similar structures are located around Port Phillip Bay and Western Port, the Brighton bathing boxes are the only remaining structures of their kind close to the Melbourne central business district. As a functional remnant of a bygone era, they provide a cultural and historical resource that is constantly being photographed, painted or drawn.

Licensees choose to differentiate their bathing boxes with minor structural, artistic and colour variations. When viewed together they turn the beachscape into a collective work of art that can change by the hour according to season, light and colours.

History - Pre and post European settlement to 1930

Indigenous Australians who inhabited the Yarra River catchment area and eastern Port Phillip Bay and Western Port were the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung. The latter were the first Aboriginals to come in contact with Europeans near Arthurs Seat, Mornington Peninsula in 1802 and progressively thereafter.

In England, on 29 August 1840, Henry Dendy took advantage of New South Wales land sale regulations when he "paid the Commissioners for Land and Emigration £5,120 at £1 per acre, for a 'Special Survey' of eight square miles of Port Phillip land (Bate, 1983)". Unlike any other Englishman he sought his land order of 2,072 ha or 20.72 sq. km sight unseen. Professor Weston Bate's A History of Brighton describes the consternation of the squatters when Dendy arrived on 5 February 1841 to claim his land.

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History - Pre and post European settlement to 1930 con't

Both Dendy and his agent J.B. Were encountered hostility and administrative problems before procuring and developing a land grant outside a five mile (8 km) radius from Melbourne in the Parish of Moorabbin, County of Bourke. Dendy later became insolvent but "the land was resold privately without being surrendered to the Crown (Public Record Office, 1991)".

In the late 1840's stately homes were built in an area known as 'The Terrace' now called the Esplanade overlooking Dendy Street Beach which at the time had few if any bathing boxes. Local residents included Henry Dendy, J.B. Were, J. Hawdon and H.B. Foot. Elsewhere, bathing boxes existed in Brighton as far back as 1862. Most of the bathing boxes were built on the waters edge at the end of Bay Street and between Park and Wellington Streets. Numbers are uncertain but the Borough, Town and then City of Brighton may have allocated between 100 and 200 sites before the Great Depression.

The Brighton foreshore continued to be the focus of private and public attention during the transition from early settlement to rural suburb. Preserving public decency was an issue for the council but minor compared with foreshore ownership and bathing box disputes between 1862 and 1874. Most but not all disputation arose from uncertainty in the original land titles granted. Theoretically the Colonial Government had set aside a strip of land a chain wide (20.1 m) immediately above the high water mark for a public thoroughfare. A practical test arose in the vicinity of 'The Terrace' when Nicholas Were sought to sell by auction land between the Esplanade and the high water mark in January 1876.

A 'Committee of Defence' lodged a writ of injunction based on the argument that the land had been dedicated to the public either as a reserve or as a road. Justice Molesworth ruled in the Supreme Court that the deeds were unclear on the first argument but affirmative on the second. The matter was settled out of court. Were accepted £700 for his dubious claim to the land funded by the council, Colonial Government and private donors. A year later the Government passed the Brighton Land Vesting Act 1877. In effect the Government sought to clarify the status of specified Crown Land generally known as the Brighton Beach Reserve by transferring it to the Mayor, Councillors and Burgesses of the Borough of Brighton for purposes of public recreation. The completion of a single line railway tram from St Kilda to Brighton Beach in 1906 triggered a significant increase in applications for Brighton bathing box permits and construction 1908 - 1911. The railway tramline was duplicated in 1914. By the time Brighton became a City in 1919 the rural suburb had largely given way to being residential. Roads were well developed including Beach Road (the Esplanade), and electrified trains ran from Melbourne via Brighton Beach to Sandringham.

History - Realignment and loss 1931 - 1960

Action attributable to the Great Depression included a State Government initiated work programme to reduce unemployment by building a semi continuous bluestone foreshore promenade radiating outwards from Port Melbourne. The City of Brighton responded by planning a break in the promenade at Dendy Street Beach and to remove or relocate at public expense all other bathing boxes to Dendy Street Beach. In 1934 many of the bathing boxes were moved again back from the high water mark to their present position.

The realigned bathing boxes have been described as "a group of typical older type timber bathing boxes with gable roofs well maintained and colourfully decorated. An unusually homogeneous group contributing considerably to landscape interest. Although located at the rear of the beach the boxes are visually very prominent and dominate the beach. They are sited very close together. (Port Phillip Authority and the Heritage Unit, 1985)".

'Owners' of private property on public land (licensees) seemingly needed representation because the Association formerly known as the Brighton Bathing Box Owners Association was formed circa 1935. It "is the oldest and most successful association of occupants (Port Phillip Authority and the Heritage Unit, 1985)". Currently there are 82 Brighton Bathing Boxes and eight non commercial boatsheds within the City of Bayside. The former City of Sandringham ordered near total removal of all like structures over a period of 50 years commencing in 1934 when severe storms caused many to be washed away. Post World War II conservationist opposition and lobbying changed Council policy to favour removal thereby exacerbating 'owner' neglect. The Brighton foreshore also suffered from storm and tempest. After World War II, beach sand disappeared and at least five bathing boxes were destroyed.

History - Challenges 1961 -2005

Besides natural disasters new challenges arose. Victorian authorities responsible for the management of coastal areas extended their powers to remove foreshore structures due to a perceived restriction of public access to Crown Land (Reserves) and undesirable environmental impacts. The Port Phillip Authority formally adopted such a policy in 1967. Thereafter transfer of ownership, construction or reconstruction and relocation became very difficult before the Authority was disbanded in 1986. Whereas a State (Coalition) Government supported the early status quo, a State (Labor) Government went further. In 1983 the Coastal Caucus Committee agreed that approximately 2,000 Port Phillip Bay boatsheds, bathing boxes and similar structures should be phased out over five years or less.

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History - Challenges 1961 -2005 con't

A year later the Minister responsible confirmed the policy (Port Phillip Authority and the Heritage Unit, 1985). Concurrently, the Dendy Street and Middle Brighton Beaches were replaced in 1982-83. Not surprisingly the Brighton Bathing Box Association focussed on the challenge. The Association's stated purpose was to ensure the maintenance and preservation of the boxes and to assist wherever possible in making the beach safe, well-cared for and popular place for all beachgoers. Fortunately constant use and a residency requirement in the former City of Brighton, with a population of approximately 35,000, meant that Brighton bathing box 'owners' could and historically did wield political clout when threatened by either Local or State Governments. Council and political connections aside, the Brighton Historical Society, the Association and individual member submissions to the City of Brighton and the Minister for Planning and Environment contributed to the Brighton Bathing Boxes being one of four representative groups of structures around Port Phillip Bay being recommended for retention by the Port Phillip Authority and the Heritage Unit in 1985.

Today, bureaucratic and political recognition of direct and indirect sources of income and an appreciation of sensitive community foreshore values means that both Local and State Governments favour retention of existing bathing boxes and boatsheds in preference to implementing a 'return to nature at any cost' view expressed by some conservationists. Locally Allom Lovell & Associates acknowledged heritage and culture when they recommended in 1999 the Brighton bathing boxes be placed on a Heritage Overlay within the Bayside Planning Scheme. Following elections in March 2000, Bayside City Council voted in July to heritage list 22 precincts with approximately 1,200 properties (including the bathing boxes), landscapes and trees.

History - Timeline 1802 -1836

1802

Kulin clans inhabit a large part of Central Victoria.

1803

Col David Collins and 460 people settle briefly at Sullivan Bay.

William Buckley first European to walk around Port Phillip Bay.

1835

John Batman finds a spot suitable for a village and negotiates a treaty.

1836

The village is named Melbourne by Governor Richard Bourke.

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History - Timeline cont 1840 -1933

1840

NSW Government issues permits for lime kilns to be built on foreshore at Point Nepean.

In England Henry Dendy purchases special survey sight unseen.

1841

Dendy arrives in Melbourne and takes up Brighton Estate.

1851

Colony of Victoria formed just before discovery of gold.

1861

Railway line Flinders Street to Brighton Beach opened.

1862

First recorded Brighton bathing box dispute recorded.

1863

Brighton Beach Baths [saltwater] opened.

1873

Beach Road (the Esplanade) created in Brighton.

1875

Brighton Sailing Club formed.

Nicholas Were offered for sale land from the Esplanade to Dendy Street Beach high water mark, local Committee lodged an injunction, Supreme Court finds title must allow for a public road, matter settled out of Court.

1877

Brighton Land Vesting Act 1877 transfers Brighton Beach Reserve from the Crown to the Borough of Brighton.

1881

Green Point formal gardens created.

1882

Middle Brighton Baths [saltwater] opened.

1887

Railway line extended from Brighton Beach to Sandringham.

1906

Electric railway tram line opened from St Kilda to Brighton Beach via Esplanade

1910

Brighton Beach residential and bathing box construction peaks.

1918

Brighton cyclone destroys structures north and south of Green Point.

1919

City of Brighton formed.

1923

Brighton Life Saving Club (BLSC) formed and clubhouse built on Dendy Street Beach.

1933

Dendy Street Beach kiosk built next to BLSC clubhouse.

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History - Timeline con't 1934 -1988

1934

All scattered Brighton bathing boxes removed or relocated to Dendy Street Beach to enable building of a bluestone foreshore promenade from Port Melbourne during the Great Depression.

Brighton bathing boxes realigned.

1951

City of Brighton bathing box audit triggers instructions to Licensees 'fix them or else.'

1954

Brighton Bathing Box Association becomes active.

1957

City of Brighton motion to remove bathing boxes defeated.

BLSC clubhouse destroyed by fire.

Closure of Brighton Beach railway tram commences.

1958

City of Brighton acknowledges increasing degradation of beaches.

1960

City of Sandringham commences removal of foreshore structures.

New and relocated BLSC clubhouse opened absorbing North Road Life Saving Club.

1963

Brighton Historical Society formed.

1966

Port Phillip Authority Act 1966.

1967

Guy Boyd and others form Brighton Foreshore Protection Committee.

1970

Port Phillip Conservation Council formed.

1978

Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978.

1979

Demolition of Brighton Beach Baths.

1982-83

Renourishment of Middle Brighton and Dendy Street Beaches.

1985

Report on historical and architectural significance of bathing boxes, boatsheds and similar structures prepared for the Minister for Planning and Environment.

1986

Port Phillip Authority disbanded.

1987

Planning and Environment Act 1987.

1988

Local Government Act 1989.

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History - Timeline cont 1994 - 2002

1994

Three Commissioners appointed to oversee formation of Bayside City Council as part of Local Government amalgamations.

1995

Coastal Management Act 1995.

Heritage Act 1995.

1996

Draft Standards for Bathing Box & Boatshed Construction prepared.

CSIRO Port Phillip Bay Environmental Study Final Report.

1997

Bayside City Council first election.

Bayside Coastal Strategy adopted.

Victorian Coastal Strategy #1.

1998

Bayside Coastal Art Trail opens.

2000

Draft Bathing Box and Boatshed Policy & Management Guidelines prepared by Department of Sustainability and Environment.

Bayside Planning Scheme adds Brighton bathing boxes within a Heritage Overlay.

2001

Bayside Tourism Strategy adopted.

2002

Victorian Coastal Strategy #2.

Environs - Brighton

Melbourne's leafy residential suburb of Brighton includes shopping precincts, historic places of interest and the Brighton Beach Reserve. Residents' close recreational affinity with Port Phillip Bay is reflected in the development of the Reserve. For example Royal Brighton Yacht Club, Middle Brighton [saltwater] Baths, Brighton Life Saving Club, Brighton bathing boxes and 2nd/11th Sea Scouts.

The formal gardens and car park at Green Point, besides providing a photographic vantage point, complement the Brighton dune's native and other vegetation preserved by Bayside City Council and active conservationists.

Also within the Reserve is part of the Bayside Coastal Art Trail. The trail seeks to celebrate the lives and artwork of notable Australian artists by means of display boards. Frederick McCubbin's oil painting 'Summer Sea' 1895 was painted midway Dendy Street Beach.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1.

Within Port Phillip Bay and Western Port, how many bathing boxes, boatsheds and similar structures are there?

A1.

Approximately 1,860 with 1,315 located on the Mornington Peninsula as at 1 July 2005.

Q2.

Are any listed on the Victorian Heritage Register?

A2.

Yes. H1191. Ilyuka Lime Kiln/Bathing Box (1880, 1930). 2-16 Point King Rd. Portsea.

Q3.

What is the difference between a bathing box and a boatshed?

A3.

Scale, proportion and function.	Approximate LxWxH	Roof pitch
Bathing box:	2.4m X 2.0m X 2.0m	35°
Boatshed:	6.2m X 3.0m X 2.4m	30°

Q4.

Are there architectural or construction guidelines?

A4.

Yes. Kong, A. & Yttrup, P. Draft Standards for Bathing Box & Boatshed Construction. November 1996. DSE.

Q5.

Who use the Brighton bathing boxes?

A5.

Bayside City Council issue annual licences to Bayside residents for personal use normally change facilities and storage of personal and other accessories. Other beach users share bay vistas, shade, the occasional step and an iconic photographic back drop.

Q6.

Can licensees paint their bathing box any colour they like?

A6.

No. Bayside City Council and the Brighton Bathing Box Association provide guidelines.

Q7.

Can public access be gained to one or more Brighton bathing boxes consistent with the annual licence?

A7.

Yes. Contact the Brighton Bathing Box Association.

Q8.

Who is responsible for beach infrastructure, user pay car parking, cleaning, rubbish removal, lighting and dog regulation enforcement throughout the year?

A8.

Bayside City Council.

Q9.

Do people wishing to hold a wedding ceremony or advertising industry and film user groups need a permit to use Dendy Street Beach?

A9.

Yes. Bayside City Council.