

## **Manly Aquarium.**

Located on The Corso on what had been a 'vast and disfiguring dustheap', the Aquarium was the brainchild of two Manly aldermen, John Griffin and Robert Evans, but was 'produced solely by private enterprise'.

The building, similar to one in Melbourne, was completed in just eight weeks and was the first aquarium in the colony of New South Wales. In addition to two large halls, six fish tanks, arcades and refreshment rooms, there was also a conservatory and a fernery filled with tropical and sub-tropical plants. "Every effort will be made to imitate nature as nearly as possible" the Sydney Morning Herald reported. In another part of the grounds there was a separate building to house seals, brought in from the 'extreme western coast of Victoria'. The Aquarium was lit by electric lights that were powered by a 20-horse-power Scotian engine, used in the day for pumping work. There was a 'considerable amount of speechmaking indulged in' on 23 December 1886 when the Aquarium was opened.

Claude Leplastrier, who worked there as a young man, recalled many years later that the Aquarium housed a 'very fine' collection of fish of considerable scientific interest and that in the holiday season 'great crowds thronged' to see the exhibits. One attraction, a 'fight' between a shark and a big seal three times its size that ended with the shark 'torn to shreds and eaten' probably did little to advance scientific knowledge. Some of the audience laughed, but most, it was noted, 'looked upon the display as an essentially brutal one'.

The collection of creatures featured Jenny, the Clever Monkey; Bos'n, the Enormous Seal; Molly, the Tame Albatross; Goliath, the Man-eating Alligator; and Jumbo, the Diabolical Octopus, 10 feet across. Admission was one shilling, children six pence.

By 1888, although the aquarium had rivals at Bondi and Coogee, it was said to be 'holding its own', mainly because people preferred the pleasant ferry trip to Manly to the dusty journey by train to the other venues, and the ferry ride was now so exceedingly cheap. By the following year, however, the aquarium section was out of operation. The tanks were used as swimming pools for a time, and public meetings were held in the Aquarium Hall in the 1890s.

Text from: Pauline Curby *Seven Miles from Sydney, a History of Manly*. p113.