

**SAVIOURS AND SPORTSMEN:
SURF LIFE SAVING IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA 1909-1930
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I

Australian surf life saving is the product of humanitarian idealism and hedonistic pleasure seeking. Eighty years ago surfing beaches attracted swimmers because of the delights of bathing or sunlazing (often nude), the urge to ride the waves, or an eagerness among some to pit their strength and prowess against one of the great natural forces, the sea. Inevitably, in an era when comparatively few people were competent swimmers, there were tragedies. Men were therefore prompted to consider the safety of others. So idealism became linked with carefree enjoyment, the result being the formation in 1906 of the Bondi Surf Bathers' Life Saving Club. The first of its kind, the club encouraged members to strive for two objectives - public safety on the beaches, and healthy competition. Today in the surf life saving movement those objectives are still paramount, and have a common symbol, the cap: saviours wear the red and gold colours of the beach patrol; when transformed into sportsmen they compete in their club's colours.

Since 1906 the ideals of surf life saving have spread far beyond Sydney's beaches. Indeed it has been suggested that Australia's surf life saver has become an identifiable part of the national character, a survivor from another era when there was an obvious pride in self discipline and mateship as well as a curious determination to defy the sea, whatever its mood.

There is no doubt that the men and women patrolling Australia's beaches are held in high esteem by the Australian people; however, as Bill Mandle suggested in 1982, "Too obvious to be properly perceived, the surf life savers have marched past the historian's gaze into oblivion"¹ Almost nothing is known about the origins of Australia's most publicised and best known community service, an organisation that has always been a reflection of the

wider society. This paper is an overdue attempt at academic rescue and resuscitation, at saving the movement's origins from drowning in obscurity.

A simplistic argument might well be developed stating that surf lifesaving was a natural evolutionary process on the readily accessible beaches of Australia's largest city. The combination of long, rolling, often dangerous surf, ever increasing numbers of swimmers and a generous humanitarian instinct, produced a predictable result. The argument loses weight when it is pointed out that within three years of the movement's birth at Bondi, it appeared on the major swimming venue of Australia's smallest state capital, Perth, a beach more often than not river-like in its placidness. Why then did the Cottesloe Life Saving and Athletic Club (L.S.A.C.) appear in September 1909, what were the forces that created it, did surf life saving follow the same form of development as in N.S.W., and when did the twin images - saviours and sportsmen - appear on Perth's beaches?

II

The late Dr. Kent Pearson, in his pioneering study of surfing sub-cultures in Australia and New Zealand, suggested that relationships between the Royal Life Saving Society (R.L.S.S.) and the Surf Life Saving Association "were characterized by conflict with occasional periods of calm..." He also claimed that surf bathers, the eventual members of surf life saving clubs, found themselves opposed by "the local government authorities, who were supported by ratepayers living close to the sea?"² Cottesloe L.S.A.C. was vigorously promoted by the R.L.S.S. Later that body amicably agreed to a parting of the ways with the surf clubs in 1925, the outcome being the foundation of a separate body, the West Australian Surf Life Saving Association. Always a relatively harmonious relationship existed between the still water and surf life saving movements in the formative years.

As for the attitude of local government authorities and their ratepayers, the other driving force behind Cottesloe L.S.A.C.'s

formation was the Cottesloe Council, two members acting as midwives at the club's birth. Everyone, from the Mayor Evan Wisdom to the Town Clerk, C.T. Campbell, was totally behind this new beach activity.

However before discussing the foundation it should be placed within a broader context. When gold discoveries ushered in the boom of Western Australia's "roaring nineties", people poured into the state from the depression ridden eastern colonies as well as from overseas. Not only did the mining centres of Coolgardie, Kalgoorlie and Boulder flourish, so did the state as a whole, for its total population skyrocketed upwards from 48,500 in 1890 to 180,000 in 1900. Lucky diggers and entrepreneurs invested in property, Perth's suburbs sprawled outwards to the coast, swimming baths were built to escape the summer heat and the Swan River, lethal as it was to the many non-swimmers, became a summer playground.

As river bathing grew in popularity it became only a matter of time before the ocean beaches shared in this new recreation. Soon "day trippers" began flocking to Cottesloe, the most accessible of them.

Originally settled by the Butler family in the 1830s, and declared a suburban area by the then surveyor-general John Forrest in 1886, the first Cottesloe residential block was sold two years later. Despite that hallmark of progress, until 1893 the suburb remained little more than an attractive site for military camps, and a resort for adventurous picknickers who arrived by train. Then, with the gold boom change came like a thunderbolt. Between 1893 and 1898 the number of people living between river and sea shot up from less than twenty to more than a thousand. Shrewd business and professional men, aware of the colony's phenomenal growth, saw how seaside land would soon appreciate in value. They bought, and Cottesloe sprang to life. In 1895 after a petition from many residents, Road Board status was granted. Nine years later there were sufficient people in the district for it to be divided into wards for local government elections.

Naturally many of the residents enjoyed their nearby beach. As for the day trippers attracted from Perth's "inland" suburbs, after 1900 they arrived on weekends by the trainload at Cottesloe

station, ready for an exciting walk up the Forrest St. hill to its peak where they caught sight of the ocean and the low off shore smudge that was Rottneest. At the foot of the hill the beach was a glorious curve of glistening white sand and low surf, bounded at its southern end by the limestone headland and reef known as Mudurup Rocks. Some elderly residents still fondly recall that it was not simply the beach that drew the weekend crowds. Besides the pale green waters and cooling sea breezes, a magnetic attraction was Cottesloe's jetty, completed in 1908. Unpainted except for red lead on the roof of the rotunda, it was about one hundred metres long, a fine solid structure where gaping crowds could promenade for hours, watching the surf roll in beneath their feet. In 1909 Cottesloe was Perth's most fashionable surfing beach. With forty bathing sheds, seven or eight refreshment stalls, a small boatshed and a merry-go-round, its popularity was assured.

Naturally a consequence of that popularity was problems for the Road Board and its successor, the Municipal Council. Regulations regarding fishing, swimming, behaviour on the jetty, and swimming apparel had to be devised, the latter particularly reflecting Edwardian morality. Then there were worrying rescues and drownings. In April 1905, for example, Thomas Ockerby, board member and local flour miller, Joseph Barsden a barrister and C.T. Campbell assistant clerk of the Road Board rescued Mrs. O'Brien and her son who were being swept out to sea. The incident is interesting because it underlines the fact that several of Cottesloe's leading citizens were beachgoers - and in 1909 all three were among the foundation members of the Cottesloe L.S.A.C. As we shall see, contrary to Pearson's evidence of antipathy between Council, rate-payers and beach users in N.S.W., no such hostility existed at Cottesloe because almost everyone used the beach, including those who were most likely to be concerned about their suburb's reputation and development.

The little evidence available suggests that Cottesloe's citizens, many of whom were wealthy business and professional people in Perth, decided to promote their beach's attractions. Therefore, through their elected representatives they pressed the Council to form a Sea Beach Committee in January 1909. The Committee had the responsibility for all matters concerned with the beach, foreshore

and jetty. Soon it was organising "gala days" in late summer, but during the ensuing winter months it busied itself with more important business.³ The climax was the foundation of the Cottesloe L.S.A.C.

Looking back it is now evident that the Cottesloe Council brought together several interest groups to serve its own ends. Firstly, and crucially for the development of surf life saving in Western Australia, it decided to involve the R.L.S.S. in beach safety. That, in turn led to Sergeant John Smith assuming a pivotal role. Born in county Roscommon, Ireland in June 1867, Smith had arrived in Queensland in 1871 with several other family members. He grew up in the care of his brother and sometime early in the 1890s, like thousands of others he was lured west by news of the epic gold discoveries at Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie. Rather than chancing his hand at prospecting Smith played safe by joining the police force. Between 1894 and 1907 he served in several major goldfields centres as well as being posted to Perth from 1901 to 1905. Two years later he returned there, frustrated at the slowness of promotion and eager to immerse himself in community work. The result was the development of a police life saving squad (river based), that under Smith's leadership drilled at various river bathing spots. Exhibitions of rescues, releases and water skills attracted admiring crowds of spectators, so much so that Smith, broad shouldered, deep chested, slightly shorter than average, with ramrod straight bearing, became something of a public figure.

A natural organiser it was Smith who in the middle of 1909 promoted a meeting of the W.A. Amateur Swimming Association to consider a state branch of the R.L.S.S. He was successful, and so was popularly identified as the driving force in the new organisation. Obviously Smith was the man to introduce life saving techniques to Cottesloe Beach, or rather to formalise them. For it seems from several accounts that a Scout Troop - Ocean Troop 29 - may have introduced some of its members to R.L.S.S. methods early in 1909 and these boys had acted as voluntary beach patrols.

Besides the R.L.S.S., Cottesloe's councillors also wished to harness the support of local swimmers. On 6 February "Kieran" wrote to the *West Australian*,

while on the subject of clubs I think it would be a fairly easy matter to establish a club at Cottesloe Beach. There are a number of good swimmers in the district, many of whom at present do not belong to any club. If a few of the swimmers could take this matter up, I am sure they would have very little difficulty in forming a strong club.⁴

Certainly, these swimmers could provide the nucleus of a life saving group. All that was now required was the impetus to bind these groups into a unified whole.

Cottesloe's councillors had no hesitation in seizing that role for themselves. The fusion of groups was evident on August 20, 1909, when Sergeant Smith, at the invitation of the Council, met a Cottesloe life saving class which had a staggering sixty members, including the Mayor and councillors.⁵ They remained regular attendees, and soon after a ladies class was formed. Possibly because they were conscious of the imminence of summer, in September 1909 the men's class formalised its meetings, proclaiming itself to be the Cottesloe L.S.A.C.⁶

Two public meetings were held at the Council Chambers to elect the inaugural office holders, among whom were councillors Medcalf (President) and Blackwell (Vice President). Sergeant Smith was also involved.⁷ This meant that at the beginning of the summer of 1909-1910 the R.L.S.S. had successfully established a branch at Cottesloe beach. Admittedly it was at an ocean beach, but in all other respects the club bore a close resemblance to its river-based counterparts, and to the various Swan River swimming clubs. The new club's members were saviours rather than surfing sportsmen, a very different breed from their namesakes on Sydney's beaches.

Saviours they remained until the mid 1920s. Only then, after the W.A. Surf Life Saving Association was formed, competition handbooks from Sydney began to circulate among the clubs, and state championships were organised, did the genuine surfing sportsman appear. Beforehand he was a pallid imitation, influenced far more by the R.L.S.S. than by any distinctive surfing element.

III

Among the various forces that shaped Western Australian surf life saving, one of the most conspicuous was the social character of the suburb where the movement began. Another was the motivation of Cottesloe L.S.A.C.'s influential supporters. Finally there was the distinctively different ethos of neighbouring North Cottesloe, apparently formed in the 1918-19 season although there were occasional hints of organised activity on that beach before 1914. The outcome of this combination was great loyalty to the R.L.S.S. and Inspector Smith, followed by a gradual drift to organizational independence.

Firstly then, what of the ties between suburb and club? In 1901 a writer observed that, "Adjoining Claremont are Peppermint Grove and Cottesloe, which have also been taken up by the well-to-do classes. These are particularly favoured localities, in close proximity to river and sea and contain some fine residences."⁸ More than seventy years later an interviewee recalled that people in Cottesloe, "were distant or higher up I suppose you would say." Another commented that early in the twentieth century the suburb had some beautiful homes mostly occupied by "business people; a lot retired down by the beach and these were professional people...."⁹ J.S. Battye described Cottesloe as "almost purely a residential suburb, many of the wealthiest citizens of the State having handsome homes there."¹⁰ In the same pre 1914 period most residents of nearby Peppermint Grove were former gold boom entrepreneurs, pastoralists or highly successful businessmen. This was the economic and social milieu from which the Cottesloe 'Club emerged.

The founders of the Cottesloe club were very typical of this background. For example among a sample of fifty registered members between 1909 and 1914, many of them conspicuous in the lists of office bearers, were three "gentlemen" - all residents of Peppermint Grove - a solicitor, a barrister, numerous accountants, civil servants, clerks, and one "property owner."¹¹ Claude De Bernales, the notorious mining swindler of the 1930s, who was a generous club benefactor for many years, described himself at this time as a "foundry proprietor".¹²

The two members of the Cottesloe Council who worked so hard to form the life saving club, J.W. Blackwell ("gentleman") and F.T. Medcalf (accountant) were similar in occupational status to the majority of the suburb's ratepayers who lived in the streets closest to the main beach.

It was central and southern Cottesloe that were first subdivided and therefore charmed many of Perth's business, professional and political families to the comparative summer coolness of the coast. Just as the train made their beach "the recreational area: for the city", so it allowed them to live for long periods away from central Perth, while still having easy access. Built on large blocks of land their houses featured massive stone walls (usually limestone from nearby quarries), wide verandahs and tennis courts. Most of these homes were atop the north-south ridge forming the western spine of the suburb, or on its western flanks, the best positions to benefit from the summer sea breezes.

Later, in the decade before World War I, Cottesloe's northern portion was subdivided and settled, but it was an entirely different area. There were plunging sandy gullies amid the high dunes, access by train was far more difficult, blocks of land smaller and prices proportionately much lower. Not surprisingly it became "working man's Cottesloe with many first generation English immigrants who inevitably were responsible for the district's sobriquet - "Pommie-land".¹³ The contrasts within Cottesloe were vividly reflected in the membership of the North Cottesloe Life Saving and Athletic Club. Exactly when and how that club was formed is unknown. Written records are non-existent, and reliable personal recollections sketchy. Nevertheless a members' register has survived, leaving no doubt that the North Cottesloe L.S.A.C. was in existence in the summer of 1918-19. Like its predecessor this new northern rival reflected the occupational status of those who lived nearby. South of the east-west dividing line in Cottesloe - Eric Street - lay the old propertied heartland of the suburb which provided the backbone of Cottesloe L.S.A.C. North of Eric Street, among those families who were regular beachgoers, and shared the desire to become "saviours", were salesmen, boilermakers, dairymen, drapers, carpenters, bookbinders, a cordial manufacturer, a tanner, labourers and one or two clerks.¹⁴ They might well be classified as lower middle

class and the better off among the lower classes, very different from those citizens who prompted the formation of Western Australia's first club.¹⁵ North Cottesloe's early membership came principally from among those who worked with their hands. And, they had a healthy contempt for the "tonks" who were at the southern beach.¹⁶

Differences in social composition produced noticeable differences in clubs. Although both included the word "Athletic" in their title, it was Cottesloe that took far more interest in athletics and gymnastics. From the day when its members first appeared on the beach, parallel bars, vaulting horses, mats and general gymnastic displays were evident in almost all of the club's public activities. Like the lifesaving drills supervised by Sergeant Smith, this required more than healthy minds and bodies. Discipline too was important. This mixture of qualities, none of them having much to do with surfing prowess, was highly regarded by the suburb's leading citizens - and it was they, through the council and their own membership, who controlled the club's destiny.

Possibly these wirepullers were motivated by several goals: one was to safeguard the beach's popularity by providing a visible and well publicised life saving service at a time when relatively few bathers felt secure in the sea. Another was more abstruse, apparently derived from the contemporary "national efficiency" movement in England. It was widely believed both there and in many white corners of the empire that "discipline and physical fitness [lay] at the very root of national efficiency."¹⁷ For those who believed that "men and women formed the basic raw material out of which national greatness was constructed", indifference and slackness could be overcome by a healthy, disciplined movement such as life saving which stressed regular army style drills, and swimming skills.¹⁸ When war broke out in August 1914, one result of this was that from a total club membership of 55, more than 40 enlisted for service, a response to "King and Country" members have been proud to remember.¹⁹

The third objective was to encourage development within the broad ambit of the R.L.S.S. the Council's ally in the winter of 1909. A measure of physical independence between the surf and still water movements was allowable, so the first clubrooms completed in February 1913 adjoined, but were separate from the

Society's small white shed that served for 4 years as the headquarters for both bodies. In most other respects, though, the union remained firm. There were no regular ocean life saving competitions for the simple reason that Cottesloe was the only beach based club. Therefore, loyal to their origins and Smith, club members entered the R.L.S.S. Championships in 1911 and 1912. In the next two years the club widened its interest, participating in carnivals conducted by the Amateur Swimming Association, but never severing its links with the Society.

Each Sunday morning in summer Sergeant Smith would ring a bell on the beach punctually at 11.00 a.m. It was the signal for all lifesavers present to fall in and practice drills, in and out of the water. Smith also prodded and cajoled many members to take the Society's proficiency award and Bronze Medallion. He wanted qualified lifesavers on the beach, and he succeeded. Once that was achieved he turned his attention to organizing regular patrols - a more difficult task.

Club legends claim that patrols began in 1908, but if that was so why did Smith make a special point of reporting to the January 1912 meeting of the R.L.S.S. "on the establishment of a patrol at Cottesloe"? Three weeks later the secretary of the Society wrote to the Cottesloe Council on the subject of beach patrols. The Sea Beach Committee went so far as to recommend, "that the patrolling of the beach be left in the hands of the Royal Life Saving Club,...", however the full Council swept that suggestion aside in favour of its own creation. Until 1914 the two bodies remained bound to each other, the Society going so far as to provide four tripod reels for the beach patrols.

While Cottesloe's members were saviours rather than surfing sportsmen, with Council and Society having a degree of control over developments, North Cottesloe's early years were completely different. Two contrasts may be mentioned, the first of them being club ethos. North Cottesloe was never Council sponsored, nor were its principal members from families of the same social standing as those of their southern rival. The direct R.L.S.S. influence was missing too, although Sergeant Smith (he was promoted to Inspector in 1921) was listed among the members after 1919.²⁰ According to several surviving members North Cottesloe was from the outset, a

true "surfing" club, primarily concerned with swimming, surfing and water safety. Cottesloe was "men only" in the earliest years; North Cottesloe, a family club with membership in four categories - Gentlemen, Ladies, Junior Boys, Junior Girls - quickly nurtured great strength in each. Without a jetty and diving platform which were for Cottesloe's members in the early 1920s a substitute for river swimming baths, North Cottesloe's men and women swam out to sea.

Nothing more obviously underlined the differences between the two than in the solutions each found to their desire for clubrooms. At its meeting on 7 October 1909, within days of Cottesloe's formation, the Municipal Council received a letter from the club's secretary, applying for a site for a building. The Council agreed "That a site be granted to the Club subject to the Engineer's approval for the erection of a Clubhouse on the Beach".²¹ Between that date and 1913 when the project was finally completed, club and Council were repeatedly at loggerheads, probably because the latter always held the upper hand and tended to procrastinate. Thereafter the club was always beholden to the Council and its varied pressure groups. The tradesmen of North Cottesloe didn't waste *their* time going cap in hand to the suburb's local government authority. Their pragmatic solution in 1920 was to snap up a beachfront block on the eastern side of Swanbourne Terrace.²² George Pulleine (clerk) and Charles Pitman (bookbinder) were among the small group responsible for this far-sighted step; the result was that in 1921 two stone changerooms had been built. Two years later an imposing two storey wood and iron building was finished, having been erected by members under the watchful eye of Percy Yates a local builder. Within five years the mortgage had been paid off and Messrs. Pulleine, Pitman and Yates had vested the property in the North Cottesloe Surf Life Saving Club (Inc.). Meanwhile Cottesloe's officers continued to grapple with a seemingly domineering Council.

IV

The transition to saviours and surfing sportsmen can be accurately pinpointed in W.A. It began on 12 November 1925, at a meeting held in the offices of Paton, Morris and Shellabear, accountants, of St. George's Terrace, Perth. In attendance were Inspector Smith, representing the R.L.S.S., Carl Bader (W.A. Amateur Swimming Association), three Cottesloe representatives, two from North Cottesloe, and Jim Paton, captain of the Cottesloe club as well as being a partner in the firm hosting the meeting.²³ Paton, it must be added, was also a resident of Peppermint Grove and had been a youthful foundation member of his club. The most important outcome of the meeting was the formation of "a local body under the auspices of the Surf Life Saving Assn. of Aust. to be known as the West Aust. Surf Life Saving Assn."²⁴

When the officers were elected, Paton became foundation secretary. He was instructed "to draw up a programme of events and ask clubs to make application for championships".²⁵ Paton wasted no time. Within five days he had advised clubs that the following events would be conducted as Championships in 1925-26: Water - Rescue and Resuscitation competition, Alarm Reel, Surf Race, Surf Relay Race; Beach - Parade and March Past, 100 yards Sprint, 400 yards relay. In his letter Paton added a note: "Clubs are reminded to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the handbook as all competitions will be conducted and judged as laid down therein".²⁶ Paton was referring to the handbook of the N.S.W. Head Centre of Surf Life Saving, copies of which he had received before the initial meeting and then speedily distributed to the clubs.

These two initiatives, the creation of an Association together with the programming of championships based on events conducted on N.S.W. beaches, smashed forever the longstanding nexus with the R.L.S.S. Yet there was no bitterness or tension between the two bodies, as the presence of Smith at the meeting revealed. Furthermore, Paton worked for some years from within the R.L.S.S. in 1922, "The Association to be a branch of, and affiliated with the w.a. branch of the Royal Life Saving Society".²⁷ The R.L.S.S. showed little interest in Paton's ideas over the next eighteen months, despite his reminders, so finally he tried a different tack. The result was regular N.S.W. style surf lifesaving compe-

titions, allowing the sportsmen image to blossom forth in the remainder of the 1920s.

The origins of this watershed were deeply embedded in Cottesloe's previous history. Jim Paton as a foundation member appears to have been immensely proud of the Cottesloe L.S.A.C. Certainly he took a prominent competitive part in its activities prior to 1916 when he enlisted in the Army. In that year with most members overseas it seemed the club was doomed, nevertheless its indefatigable secretary W.G. Smith, worked tirelessly to maintain repayments on the clubrooms, while also encouraging many of the district's youth to join. Consequently when the war ended there was a sound base from which to launch the club afresh. Smith, though, decided he had served for long enough. After nine years as secretary he appealed to Paton to become a driving force in the club's future development.²⁸

Like so many of Cottesloe L.S.A.C.'s members Paton was a highly successful businessman: and in 1921 when he stepped into Smith's shoes he lived in Peppermint Grove. Thus at work in St. George's Terrace, Perth's principal business street, and at home in what has recently been called Western Australia's "capital suburb", Paton mixed with those who, socially and politically, were highly influential.²⁹ There are several clues to this: in 1925 when the W.A. Surf Life Saving Association was formed, he quickly persuaded the Governor Sir William Campion to be the patron, Leonard Le Quesne a prominent woolbroker to be president, and Ivor Birtwistle, political roundsman for the *West Australian* to serve as publicity officer. Like Paton each of the three was also a freemason, another social network that was to be important for surf lifesaving in the future.

Politically Paton was imbued with solid conservative principles. He was also tinged with some of the ideology of the pre-war National Efficiency movement whose goals were evident in the objectives of the Perth Argonauts Civic and Political Club which had a shortlived existence between 1925 and 1930.³⁰ Harold Boas, prominent architect and Peppermint Grove resident was its father figure. In general terms the Argonauts fostered the idea of "Service"; politically the virtues of imperial unity, anti-communism and freedom of the individual were upheld; civic objectives included "co-ordinated development of our towns and cities on scientific lines"; furthermore

the Argonauts endeavoured to inspire members, "to take their place in the furthering of the cause of Social Welfare Work, Charities, and Educational Institutions of the State". Hopefully it would be Western Australia's young manhood who would take up these challenges.³¹ Jim Paton did so with great gusto - Paton, Morris & Shell-a bear acted as auditors, and he was treasurer in 1926. Like many of his Peppermint Grove contemporaries Paton preferred working behind the scenes in State politics (Boas was an exception to this), but the principles and beliefs that moved him to join the Argonauts were very evident in his surf life saving activities.

Between 1921 and 1927, Paton almost singlehandedly changed the image of the movement in Western Australia. Faith in youth, an ideal of public service, discipline and firmly stated goals were his creed as he set to work. His first step was to become active in municipal politics, to lobby the Cottesloe Council on all issues relating to the beach, and to speak out at meetings of ratepayers.³² In 1922 he contacted the North Steyne (N.S.W.) club, requesting a copy of its constitution which duly arrived. That then became the basis of Cottesloe's first written document including a statement of objectives and rules that left little doubt how Cottesloe L.S.A.C. was to be different from R.L.S.S. and Amateur Swimming Clubs. Links with the former were deliberately weakened by the adoption of a club "surf test" for all members.³³ It was the title rather than the requirements that was portentous.

At the 1923 Annual General Meeting Paton proceeded to push through a series of changes designed to emphasize Cottesloe's distinctive surf life saving identity.³⁴ The club uniform - specially designed bathers - were to be worn at all times, Membership was to be sixty active and forty associate members. Paton wished to weld together, "a good solid band of workers", and he believed, "the standard of work performed by the Club members could be greatly improved. That was passed unanimously. Then the surf test was changed so that it resembled a modern day run-swim-run; everyone also had to be competent in all positions of a "reel rescue team". Never before had such a tough line been taken, so why did Paton demand such changes?

The members must have been wide-eyed as he stated his case. Everyone in the club, Paton suggested, was morally bound to be

physically fit. Certain members wanted to turn the club into a social centre, and he believed that it would collapse ignominiously if that was the case. As well he did not intend taking "public office" simply to manage "a glorified dressing-room? Naturally opponents pleaded for moderation. They lost. Paton had his way and out of the crisis came an organization similar to N.S.W. clubs, both in organization and beach activities, with a sense of surf lifesaving purpose.

This breakthrough was quickly consolidated. Since 1922 Paton had used his membership of the R.L.S.S. executive to promote the idea of a Surf Life Saving Association. In October 1923, after his successes at Cottesloe's meeting, Paton alerted his club to a re-drafting of the W.A. Amateur Swimming Association's rules.³⁵ He believed that the revision would not help the surf club's interests, and therefore asked the committee to seriously consider a West Australian Surf Life Saving Association, affiliated with the parent body in N.S.W. Although nothing occurred immediately, Cottesloe L.S.A.C. affiliated with the N.S.W. S.L.S.A. in the 1923-24 season, thereby further weakening the grip of the R.L.S.S. on club affairs. Another symbolic move was the club's success in taking over the use of the Society's tiny beach shed for its own purposes.

By now Paton's intentions must have been obvious to everyone. If the R.L.S.S. was not interested in an affiliated surf association, then he would use his club as a power base for pushing Western Australian surf life saving into an alliance with the powerful N.S.W. association. Paton took great care with the groundwork for this project. Firstly he asked for Cottesloe's blessing for the project. That came, in the winter of 1925. Secondly he wrote to the headquarters of surf life saving in Sydney, for constitutional advice, instructional and competition handbooks, and moral support. All were willingly supplied. Thirdly, as part of this carefully planned operation Paton approached other Western Australian clubs, most notably neighbouring North Cottesloe, for their backing.³⁶ When all the pieces of the jigsaw were in place, he then called the meeting of 12 November 1925, secured the vital secretary's position for himself, and arranged for a Cottesloe stalwart, Leo Le Quesne to be the first president. It was a neatly executed coup, leaving the R.L.S.S. and the Amateur Swimming Association as somewhat bemused onlookers.

The unifying thread in these machinations may well have been Paton's perceptive realization that for club members to be saviours was not enough, especially on the placid Perth beaches where dangerous surf was rarely experienced. Under such conditions patrols were little more than a boring ritual. While intra-club competitions did relieve the tedium, encouraging fitness and self discipline, there was little of the pageantry and glamour associated with the militaristic, devil-may-care movement in N.S.W. where surf carnivals drew thousands of admiring spectators. Every move that Paton made suggests that he knew how to give Western Australia's surf life savers this sportsmen image; the solution was to persuade all clubs to agree to an Association which could then be given the responsibility for organising regular competitions, the events being those that had been so effective in popularising surf life saving as a sport in N.S.W. There lay the deeper significance of the two meetings in November 1925. Paton was confident that surf life saving would flourish when independent of the R.L.S.S., because competition would attract members. He was right.

Very few club membership statistics have survived for Cottesloe, where membership after 1922 seems to have been approximately 120. In the case of North Cottesloe the first register of members reveals that the totals in consecutive seasons from 1926-27 were 77, 143, 146 and 154.³⁷ Then, with the coming of the depression, membership of both Cottesloe clubs declined as men were unable to pay their fees or drifted off to the country in their search for work. All that can be said about membership is that North Cottesloe, which was the most successful club in competitive terms during these years, certainly did not suffer because of the growing frequency and higher status of "championship carnivals", spectacles that had far greater public appeal than the somewhat pedestrian "gala days" of the early 1920s. Interestingly membership of each club was still drawn predominantly from those Cottesloe streets closest to the particular beach. During 1923-1925, for example, 90% of all nominees for the Cottesloe Club lived in central or southern Cottesloe, or Pepperming Grove.³⁸

Jim Paton must have been pleased with himself in December 1925, for his achievements since 1920 had been outstanding. Nevertheless he had no thoughts of resting on his laurels while one very

obvious step remained. For Western Australian surf life saving to be a replica of its N.S.W. counterpart in both lifesaving and competition, face to face contact had to be made. Earlier in the 1920s while secretary of Cottesloe L.S.A.C. Paton had worked hard to arrange for a club team to visit N.S.W. but lack of finance sank the project. A near knockout in round one simply spurred him to greater efforts in round two. Why shouldn't a N.S.W. team come to Western Australia? Having corresponded with Donald McIntyre, secretary of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia, for more than a year, Paton now used this contact to advantage. The result was the arrival of a N.S.W. team.³⁹

Competition was not the only purpose of the visit. With Western Australian clubs now affiliated with the Australian Association in Sydney, there was the difficulty of life saving qualifications. If Western Australia was to emulate the N.S.W. clubs, who would examine candidates for the surf life saving Bronze Medallion, a radically different award from its R.L.S.S. twin? This problem could easily be overcome by the N.S.W. team training a handful of instructors who could then become the nucleus of a Board of Examiners. According to Ken Watson, a team member, there were only two qualified examiners among the visitors, but that was sufficient. On 28 December 1927 the West Australian S.L.S.A. Board of Examiners came into being, with Jim Paton one of the first members. Thereafter all Western Australian surf life savers were instructed and examined in methods identical with those employed in N.S.W.

As for competition, it was not forgotten. During December 1927 and January 1928 the visitors appeared in two carnivals and gave several exhibitions of drill techniques many of which were speedily introduced into club teams. Their presence injected enormous enthusiasm into local carnivals, especially the prestigious rescue and resuscitation (R & R) events, the centrepiece of every carnival at that time and for decades afterwards. More importantly, the N.S.W. team provided a model for the somewhat uncertain local "sportsmen". From 1928 onwards there was no doubt that the transformation from saviours had been completed, and would be permanent. For Jim Paton it must have been a very satisfying climax to almost a decade of effort.

The changes in West Australian surf life saving between 1920 and 1928 were of great significance to the movement's future growth. Jim Paton engineered most of them, using the Cottesloe Club as his power base. Understandably then, in terms of a hierarchy of clubs within the state, Cottesloe was regarded as pre-eminent. In its constitution, structure and beach operating methods it became the model for Bunbury (formed in 1915 and reformed ten years later) City of Perth (1925) North Beach (1926) Scarborough (1928) and Geraldton (1929). The exception was North Cottesloe which proudly pursued its own somewhat independent path, to the point where by 1930 its competitive superiority was the envy of all rivals. As the economic depression deepened however, W.A.'s surf life saving clubs no longer suffered from an identity crisis. They were surf clubs, their members saviours and sportsmen.

A movement whose genesis sprang from the enthusiasm of Cottesloe councillors, a wider concern about beach safety among the suburb's residents, linked with the willingness of the R.L.S.S. to become involved, eventually was transformed into a community service and sporting body affiliated to an organisation in New South Wales. In the process local government and the R.L.S.S. were pushed into the background insofar as control of the movement was concerned. What remained paramount in the growth of Western Australian surf life saving was the willingness of those residents using a surfing beach to transform their itinerant pleasures into a more regular activity.

Like the clubs, after 1925 the newly formed Association epitomised the outlook of the men who dominated it. Sharing private school, business and suburban connections, Cottesloe's leaders gave their club a distinctive "athletic" ethos. Later when men of similar background to Jim Paton became his allies in the W.A. Surf Life Saving Association, they encouraged the foundation secretary to give the movement a certain standing in the community.

For example, in August 1926, Paton wrote to all clubs advising them of a forthcoming Association Social, "being held largely with an eye towards propaganda and we intend to ask several

prominent citizens, with His Excellency the Governor at the head, to attend this function. We also wish to enlist a number of such gentlemen as associate members of the surf movement in W.A."⁴⁰ Cottesloe promptly replied with a list including three knights, together with several retired army men and politicians, including a relation of Sir John Forrest.⁴¹ Obviously the strong Cottesloe element decided that the Association should align itself with Government House and the Legislative Council rather than Trades Hall. Given Jim Paton's ties with the anti-communist Argonauts this was certainly predictable.

By 1930 then, surf lifesaving in Western Australia had assumed the form that remained virtually unchanged for the next fifty years: Association and Board of Examiners, patrols and competitions, team work and individualism. For the saviours came a renewed sense of purpose after a horrifying shark attack at Cottesloe late in 1925; lookout towers soon dotted all patrolled beaches, patrols themselves became more highly disciplined, and surfboats appeared - copied from N.S.W. designs and intended to combat the shark menace. For the sportsmen, regular carnivals and championships quickly produced some magnificent competitors - beltmen, sprinters and rowers - who attracted the publicity the movement deserved. The result was a community service and a sport which today can boast that it has saved more than ten thousand West Australian lives through "Vigilance and Service".

NOTES:

- 1 W.F. Mandle & G. Osborne (eds.), *New History: Studying Australia Today* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982), p.90.
- 2 Kent Pearson, *Surfing Subcultures of Australia and New Zealand* (St. Lucia: Univ. of Qld. Press, 1979), pp.40-41.
- 3 Cottesloe Municipal Council, *Minute Book*, meetings Feb.-April, 1909.
- 4 *West Australian*, 6 February 1909, p.14.
- 5 Royal Life Saving Society, *Minute Book 1*. Minutes of meeting 1 September, 1909.

6. *West Australian*, 9 September, 1909, p.12.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Twentieth Century Impressions of Western Australia* (Perth: Thiel & co., 1901), p.397.
9. D.L. Robinson, "A Demographic and Social History of Perth and Suburbs: 1901-1911" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of W.A., 1979), p.350.
10. J.S. Battye, *The Cyclopedia of Western Australia* Vol. 1 (Perth: Cyclopedia Company, 1912?) p.555.
11. Cottesloe S.L.S.C., Minute Book 1, including register of members, and various Legislative Assembly Electoral Rolls - Claremont Electorate.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Oral evidence.
14. North Cottesloe L.S.A.C. Register, and Electoral Rolls - Claremont Electorate.
15. This classification of classes is that used by Robinson, *op.cit.*
16. Oral evidence.
17. G.R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), pp.65-66.
18. *Ibid.*, p.60.
19. Cottesloe S.L.S.C., Minute Book 1, p.197.
20. North Cottesloe L.S.A.C., Register (Members).
21. Cottesloe Municipal Council, Minute Book, meeting 7 October, 1909.
22. Oral evidence.
23. West Australian Surf Life Saving Association, Minute Book 1, Meeting 12 November, 1925.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. Cottesloe S.L.S.C. correspondence 1922-1927, J. Paton to C. Knight 17 November, 1925.

27. Royal Life Saving Society, Minute Book 3, meeting 6 December, 1922.
28. J.L. Paton, "History of Life Saving on Western Australian Beaches..." (unpublished notes) p.7.
29. Robert Pascoe, *Western Australia's Capital Suburb: Peppermint Grove* (Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983).
30. F.G. Clark, "The Argonauts Civic and Political Club: An Early Attempt at Industrial Group Organisation in Western Australia 1925-1930", *Labour History* 18 (1970), pp.32-9.
31. Boas Papers, Battye Library Acc. No. 450a, "The Argonauts".
32. Cottesloe S.L.S.C., Minute Book 1.
33. *Ibid.*, meeting 14 September, 1922.
34. *Ibid.*, meeting 6 September, 1923. This and the following paragraph are based upon the minutes of this meeting.
35. *Ibid.*, meeting 17 October, 1923.
36. *Ibid.*
37. North Cottesloe L.S.A.C., Register (Members).
38. Cottesloe S.L.S.C., membership nomination file, 1923-1927.
39. This account of the visit is based on a letter to the author from H.K. Watson (Team Captain), March 1978.
40. Cottesloe S.L.S.C., Correspondence 1922-1927, J.L. Paton to C. Knight 2 August, 1926.
41. *Ibid.*, Knight to Paton (copy) 1 September, 1926.