Reviews


‘Then and now’ books are a reminder that one of the staple themes of historical study is change over time. Gibbon, in a famous passage of his *Decline and Fall*, has the mythical Seven Sleepers wake to see how much their surroundings have altered in their nearly two centuries of slumber, whereas people who were conscious from day to day in this period would scarcely have noticed change at all, it being so incremental.

*Sea Change* presents many images of the City of Holdfast Bay over a period of one and three-quarter centuries, and is a contribution to the commemoration of South Australia’s 175th anniversary. As an index of change, the city’s name of Holdfast Bay dates from only 1997, when the cities of Glenelg and Brighton were amalgamated.

The book is divided into four chronological sections, with the ‘then’ illustrations beginning roughly in a particular period (there is some overlap), and more recent illustrations being added up to the present day. So in Part One, ‘Tents to stone mansions’, ‘then’ runs from 1836 to approximately the turn of the twentieth century, and by Part Four, ‘Surge to the seaside’, ‘then’ has become the period just after World War Two. The images - some paintings, but most photographs - are accompanied by succinct commentaries.
Issues of taste come into play, but we suspect that many readers would see deterioration rather than improvement as, where an older building has been replaced, they contrast the ‘now’ with the ‘then’. So with the gracious mansion ‘De La Haye House’, replaced by a crass supermarket. Nostalgia is involved here too, as so many devotees of local history suspect that the past had good things we have lost. In view of the above, there is a certain irony in the choice of ‘Sea Change’ as the title for the book, with the epigraph from *The Tempest*: ‘Nothing of him that doth fade, /But doth suffer a Sea-change /Into something Rich, and Strange.’ Many see the past rather than the present as what is ‘rich and strange’, and so for them this book would depict a change away from rather than towards that condition, to something poorer and less interesting, the ‘fading’ having gone the other way.

One wonders for example why Sir Douglas Mawson’s home was demolished in the 1960s, considering he is one of South Australia’s greatest figures and an icon of adventure and heroism. There is nowadays so much concern over his hut in Antarctica, but who thought about his house in Brighton?

But who is consistent? The theme of progress holds sway as well, from pioneering days to the present, and big and shiny modern structures can be sources of satisfaction, especially if they replaced small and drab buildings. The habitués of the surf lifesaving clubs must be glad they enjoy more salubrious premises than the little sheds they used to put up with.

Furthermore, the fact that so many of the older illustrations are of necessity monochrome photographs, and these are contrasted with brilliant full-colour modern shots, can give the impression that it’s the past that is drab and the present which has more life. Mind you,
the older pictures are usually given a larger format than the more recent.

The more contemporary use of the term ‘sea change’ gets an airing as well, to reflect that so much of the history of these coastal communities involves the aspiration to live by the water, as a highly desirable location.

Despite ‘change’, many features remain: buildings, trees, businesses. Kithers’ butchering business is in its fifth generation at the original location in Jetty Road, Glenelg.

The illustrations and commentary do not deal with buildings and views alone. We are reminded how the minutiae of daily life have changed. So with the supply of milk to the home: ‘There were many dairy farms in Brighton, producing milk that was delivered to houses with a horse and cart, and ladled from a bulk container into a “billycan” on the front verandah’. In some old photographs the reader’s eagle eye detects horse manure on the roads, and memories of childhood bring back the smell.

It is striking how busy the beaches can be in some old photographs, packed not just with people and vehicles but also with temporary structures, tents and kiosks and so on. And it’s piquant that people at the beach wore so much more in those times than they usually do nowadays.

The natural world gets some attention, as it is damaged and sometimes fights back. How sad that the Tjilbruke Spring has deteriorated so badly, as the photographs clearly show. Sandhills and foreshores were cleared, but nature threw frequent storm damage at the ‘improvements’ of man. Now some attempt is made at salvage, with revegetation projects.
The illustrations end with aerial shots, from the days of aeroplanes to the days of satellites, so that changes in the very coastline can be studied.

Two indexes are provided, one expectedly of Places, but another thoughtfully of People.

Wakefield Press has produced another handsome volume, with design by Mark Thomas, and a stunning cover photograph. Jim Blake is to be commended for suggesting the book in the first place, and for taking most of the contemporary photographs. Also to be thanked and congratulated are the Local History Coordinator, Dieuwke Jessop, and her numerous volunteers at the Holdfast Bay History Centre, which has done such sterling work since its formation in 2000. Many others contributed as well, even ‘the two truck drivers who held back traffic on Brighton Road to allow the Brighton Primary School to be photographed’.