The Old Railway (1885-1905)
Before, During and After

For Oatley Heritage Group

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Before, During and After

The exact location of the actual Oatley railway station during the twenty years from 1885 to 1905 triggered this work. In "*The History of St Joseph's Oatley*" I had stated that the first railway station was located where the War Memorial now stands". Someone queried this. So I am going back on that piece of Oatley history.

I have appended many relevant references, maps and diagrams. You should find them of interest. I have quoted generously from good relevant books/articles.

As you leave Frederick Street and cross the park heading for the present Oatley Station, you will notice a little sign on your left which says:

Oatley's Grant Platform

"The Original Oatley's Grant Platform commenced operation on 26th December 1885, when the line was opened between Hurstville and Sutherland, the Platform was situated nearby in this park. The present Oatley station was opened 7th July 1905 following regrading of the line between Mortdale and Como, the last train on the old line was the Funeral train to Sutherland, it returned using
the new line. "

This notice from our own Oatley Heritage Group refers to a very interesting time in our history referring to the original platform and rail line. The area is now covered by the beautiful Memorial Gardens. I am particularly interested in the extent of the rail platform.

In 2004, the Kogarah Council Library in its *Kogarah Heritage No 4, "Trains*, *Trains, Trains*", writes of the earlier construction of the

Illawarra Railway line as follows :

"The opening of the railway line through Kogarah in 1884 is regarded by many as being the single event to have had the greatest impact on the development of Kogarah Municipality. "

"Construction of the railway line had first been suggested in the early 1870s when it was hoped to link Sydney with the coal-rich towns of the Illawarra. Residents of the St George area enthusiastically supported the idea recognizing that it would impact greatly on their lives and the development of the area."

"Several routes for the railway line were suggested and then rejected before the Government accepted an offer from landowner, Charles Griffiths, of free land. The route of the train track began a wide sweep to the west after leaving Rockdale towards the township of Hurstville. It then turned south again through Oatley and across the Georges River to Como."

"In 1881 raising the necessary loan funds was authorized and a tender accepted for the first part of the line, 23 miles of the line including the bridge over the Georges River. The cost was £250,000. The portion as far as Hurstville was to be a double line and the remainder single. "

"The contractor commenced work on Monday 9 October 1882. ''

Following the above, the line continued through to and across the Como Bridge. Part of this work was the opening of the Oatley's Grant platform on 26th December in 1885. The name had changed to Oatley's Platform by 1889 and subsequently to Oatley.

If you examine the advertisements for auction sales at the time, you can see that the area had been subdivided into lots and the original platform had been drawn in.
The single track was duplicated between 1889 and 1891 by which time

there were separate up and down platforms. They were both lengthened at this time. A post office/telegraph office was also erected at the station. A new structure was erected on the second platform in 1890 at a cost of ?265. This structure was a simple timber framed building.

DJ Hatton, in *Oatley in Early Days,* reports that the first family to come near Oatley's Platform were the Fletchers. This was in 1885. Joseph was a railway man . "He built the first house (of corrugated iron) in Oatley on the northern side of the level crossing…Initially **,** there was only a small wooden platform and Mr Fletcher attended to the few railway passengers and to traffic across the level crossing between Frederick Street and Mulga Road."

A station master was appointed in the person of Mr John Brown. His wife and two children, John and Hettie, accompanied him. They lived in a newly built house on the southern side of the level crossing on railway land alongside the down platform.

As time went on, because of the increasing demand on the railway, increasing amounts of coal were being railed from the Illawarra. This meant longer trains. It also meant that the gradient up from the Como Bridge was too steep to cope with the increased load. A new track, the present track, had to be built. The railway station was relocated 100 yards west to its present site and was opened on 7th July 1905.

DJ Hatton writing of this time said: "Oatley Station was ….provided with a new island platform, and a subway took the place of the new original crossing and gates. The work was opened on 7 July, 1905. The last train over the old line was a funeral train to Sutherland, which on return became the first train over the new line, thus giving the gang about one and a half hours to make the connection of the deviation with the old route."

After the relocation of the station platform, the Fletchers house was demolished and this area became Oatley's Reserve. The old Oatley's

Platform is now buried metres below the level of the gardens."

After 1890, population began to pick up. Till this time, Oatley was mainly bush and the destination of picnickers in the Pleasure Gardens on Oatley Bay. A good number of the latter would have come by boat.

Thus ended a very interesting twenty years in the history of Oatley.

Exploring further :

The *ARHS Bulletin , Vol 16*, states that Oatley was opened as Oatley's in 1886 (most say 1885) and consisted of two brick platforms when duplicated with a level crossing at the Sydney end and a main cross over at the Nowra end. When the line was abandoned on the 7th July, 1905, a new island platform was provided on the deviation on a lower level opposite the original site. " The bulletin also has a diagram of the first Oatley railway station. There is neither date nor scale. It shows both up and down stations and, interestingly, a level crossing on the Sydney side of the platforms, no other crossing. There appears to be extensions on the southern side of the platforms.

The Como Bridge, the southern limit of our study, is described by Beverley Earnshaw in *The Land Between Two Rivers*. I have appended the relevant part. She has more on the Como Bridge.
  "On December 26, 1885, a single track rail bridge was opened across the Georges River at Como as part of the Illawarra Railway scheme. With a length of 320 yards (291.4 metres), it was the largest of ten similar bridges constructed by the Department of Railways between 1871 and 1888. The bridge was built over massive sandstone abutments and supported by six piers, each of two cast cylindrical columns. The columns were sunk to the rock floor of the river at depths of between feet (c. 21m) and 110 feet (.34m) below water level and each pier was tested to carry a maximum of 254 tonnes. The old Como rail bridge with its decorative iron lattice work added to the scenic charm of the

area and served until a new dual track rail bridge opened in 1972. It was classified by the National Trust in 1981 to prevent its demolition and in 1985 was converted to use as a scenic and cycle way."

A wrangle started between the railway and both the Kogarah and Hurstville Councils. The old rail line was the boundary between the two councils. A shifting of this boundary to its present place along the rail line seemed logical. This move, however, was a long time coming.

The arguments continued over the unsightly future parkland, over what could be considered the village's common.

First let us consider that part of Frederick Street between Oatley Avenue and Oatley Parade. A true mess. It is now a divided Road where the James Oatley Clock Memorial was dedicated 29th October in 1983. The task of cleaning it up fell to well disposed local residents disgusted with the inaction of the Kogarah Council. DJ Hatton described it as follows : "With picks and shovels, young and old, professional men, tradesmen and shop owners, they worked to fill in the gully and make a handsome boulevard to Oatley Station. The ladies helped by providing refreshments for the workers. The Railway Commissioners had dedicated 100 feet wide area to allow a swathe to be cut through the jungle of bushes, and across the old railway platform. From this jungle, the Oatley residents developed Frederick Street." This took place in 1928.

There was an advertisement on 6th April 1929 for the sale of land in the park both north and south of Frederick Street. At this stage the hotel was still under construction. It is interesting to compare the photos taken later in the year . They are appended. The area is shown to be the eyesore referred to below.

The sale notice of the area between Oatley Avenue and Oatley Parade shows the area through which the boundary between the two councils still ran. The Railway Department still owned the land and they were auctioning the lots shown on the notice. Eventually, Hurstville Council

relinquished control and the boundary was moved to the new rail line. The Kogarah Council helped alleviate the unemployment problem of the depression with road work in the area. This led to further work with the laying of the pipeline referred to below and other work in the park.

Thirteen years later further big changes occurred. Construction of the present day pipeline and the clearing of the park of private property is described by Elaine Howard in "*Oatley Writes*", with reference to Guy Edwin Moore. She states that ," during Mr. Moore's term of office, the pipe line was brought from Como across the Georges River and Oatley. The area from the waterside to Mortdale rail sheds was an unsightly mess of rubble for the length of the old railway embankment. Mr. Moore sought the help of the mayor of the day, Mr Sid Bell of Davis' Corner, South Hurstville. The Minister for Railways, Mr Hartigan, and the president of the Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board. He asked them to attend a conference of the three organisations with the object of Kogarah Council making a park. He suggested that the pipeline could be put underground, which delighted the M.W.S.D.B officials, but the Railway estate man pointed out the difficulties of acquiring some blocks of land which had already been sold, and settling the price to be paid. Tooths had bought two blocks between the hotel and station and eventually, when Council had acquired all the area necessary, they paid 20,000 pounds plus 200 pounds to Tooth and Company with the agreement that a path would be constructed across the park, from the station, for hotel customers. Council's Engineer, Mr Brewer, was delighted with the purchase and drew up plans for the park. The plans were on display in Oatley Post Office in 1941 prior to the elections in December, and although Mr Moore and his team were defeated, the plans were brought to fruition."

William Bayley wrote in *Sydney in the Steam Time* of "the first Oatley station and its Southern embankment which lay as an eyesore some 40 years until tidied up and turned into a park strip burying the first stations and their brick edges ".

John Oakes, a frequent visitor to the Railway archives in Redfern, has a map in his beautifully produced book , *Sydney's Forgotten Illawarra Railways*, of the original railway station located just north of what was to become the extension of Frederick Street. It was quite a small station probably not drawn to scale and not the final outcome for the position of the platform as shown in the posters for allotment sales.

 I have included a photo that I copied from one hanging in the Oatley Hotel lounge. It can be studied at leisure for the price of a beer or a lemon squash! It was taken at the end of the 1920s from the Mortdale railway sheds area looking south. Electricity had arrived in the area in 1923, seven years earlier. The electric train service had commenced on the 1st of March in 1926. Clearly visible is the former rail embankment, the general mess, the low lying Oatley Parade. Oatley Avenue is not so visible. The hotel seems to be nearly constructed as it appears in the photo of Oatley East taken from the present railway. It confirms that much work was needed to right the mess.

The location of the War Memorial is what led me into this investigation. This is what DJ Hatton said on where the War Memorial was eventually located :
"The site first investigated was land owned by the Railway Commissioners where the old station had been located. This was still in its untidy state and was not considered fitting for such a project. Mrs Cole had previously suggested that the corner of the local school ground would be suitable……….The memorial was unveiled on 25th October, 1924..… In 1951, the sub-Branch planted a number of poplar trees in Oatley Reserve in memory of fallen comrades. The need for a War Memorial in a more central position was discussed over the years and, finally in 1962, the original War memorial was incorporated in a new memorial in Oatley Reserve which had been developed into attractive gardens by Kogarah Council. The Dedication Service was held on 31st March, 1962.… The attractive gardens, covering the old railway platform, are now the Oatley Memorial Gardens. "

The poplar trees have now disappeared. The reference to the location of the old railway station is not definitive.

Now to the length of our first rail platform. Sales advertisements of these early years give us a clearer idea of the extent of the platform. The Hardie and Gorman promotion of 1886 shows the down platform of the time when there was a single track only. The platform is shown on the eastern side of the line between Oatley Avenue and the rail line located in the park. It certainly starts over the park from the hotel. The southern part extends three lots or 3x66ft south from Frederick Street. This is 60m south of the Frederick Street alignment. Where this is exactly is a problem. Stepping it out I found the Memorial joining the platform on the south. There was further lengthening of the line after those diagrams were drawn in 1886 and are those signs next to the platform the real thing and thus extending the platform further south onto the Memorial site? Or are they an artist's addition ? Most likely. The lengthening and the station signs are two additional considerations.

Further, the station was moved 100 yards directly west in 1905. If you moved the present platform directly back 100 yards then the memorial is part of the actual platform. How directly west was the original movement ?

So the position is confusing. I think the memorial is at least abutting the southern part of the old platform. DJ Hatton says of the War Memorial Committee that "the first site investigated was land owned by the Railway Commissioners where the old station had been located." With regard to the 1962 positioning of the Memorial she refers to the Oatley Reserve and to "the attractive gardens, covering the old railway platform.. now the Oatley Memorial Gardens." It was this statement by DJ Hatton that led me to write about " our first railway station which was located where the War Memorial now stands. " If anything, that would place it at least abutting the southern end. I remain happy with saying that it was placed where the old station was located.

A study such as this leaves a certain confusion and some of the writers differed in their writing. Some copied earlier writers. So if the original writer was in error the error was compounded. However, I found the sum total of their writings most interesting as was my reading of what they wrote. My greatest regret was that I was unable to find a 120 year old long time resident of Oatley who could remember exactly where the old station was located. I tried.

Time Line

1870s   Suggestion leading to Illawarra rail line construction.

1881   Loans for building line and tender for construction line
             Over the Como Bridge.
…………………………………...
1885   Opening of Oatley's Platform 26/12. Joseph Fletcher came to Oatley

1886   Sales of land advertised. Population of Oatley 9 living in two houses.

             Oatley's became Oatley's Platform.

1888   Sale of land advertised.

1890   New platform building on second platform.
             "Oatley's Platform"   changed to "Oatley".
             Platform increased in length.
             Telegraph office established at station.
             Resident station master (Mr John Brown) appointed.

1891   Duplication of line completed.

1893   Now 9 houses in vicinity.

1903   Combined post and telegraph office established at station.

1905   July 7th, present Oatley station opened.
………………………………………………………………………………………

1923   Electricity extended to area.

1924   Earlier War Memorial unveiled.

1926   Oatley terminus of first rail electrification.

1929   Present rail line becomes new boundary between councils.
         This year hotel was built.

1930   Railway land formally transferred to Kogarah Council.

1931   Poplar trees planted in Oatley Reserve.

1930s   Mid 30s pipeline constructed under Memorial Gardens.
          By 1941 Tooth's property opposite their hotel had been
bought.

          Finally planning and work for park underway.

1953   Tooths leased hotel to John Humphries.

1962   On 31st March, War Memorial moved to present site.
         Oatley Reserve becomes Oatley Memorial Gardens.
1973   Opening of new Como Bridge.

1977   John Humphries becomes holder of hotel licence (27/6).

1983   Oatley Clock Tower unveiled (29/10).

References

Heritage Advisor State Rail
Significance of Oatley's Railway Station, Stuart Sharp.

Oatley in the Early Days, DJ Hatton.

Oatley Writes : Elaine Howard on Guy Edwin Moore.

Hurstville City Library -Time Line.

Sydney Suburban Steam Railways, William A Bayley.

Railway History in Illawarra NSW, CC Singleton.

ARHS Bulletin Vol 16 .

Kogarah Municipal Library, Two photos, one a copy of one hanging in
the Oatley Hotel and one from DJ Hatton's Oatley in the Early Days.

Kogarah Municipal Library, 7 Sheets - 6 advertising land sales during
the first few years of our first railway and 1 in 1929.

Sydney in the Steamtime,   William A Bayley.

Sydney's Forgotten Illawarra Railways, John Oakes.

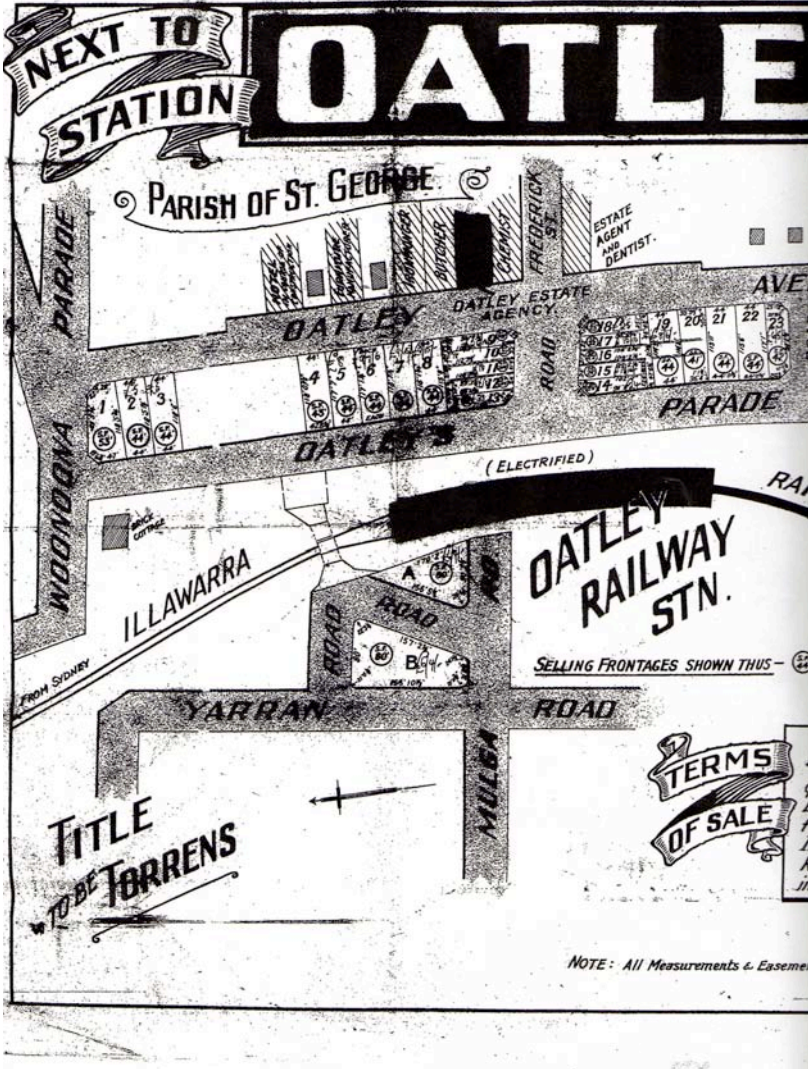Metropolitan and Illawarra Branch Lines Part 4, 2006.

The Land Between Two Rivers,   Beverley Earnshaw.

Trains, Trains, Trains, Kogarah's Heritage No 4 Kogarah Council
Library September 2004.

Oatley Railway Station, Conservation Plan, Miriam Stacy and Natalie Broughton,
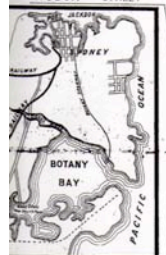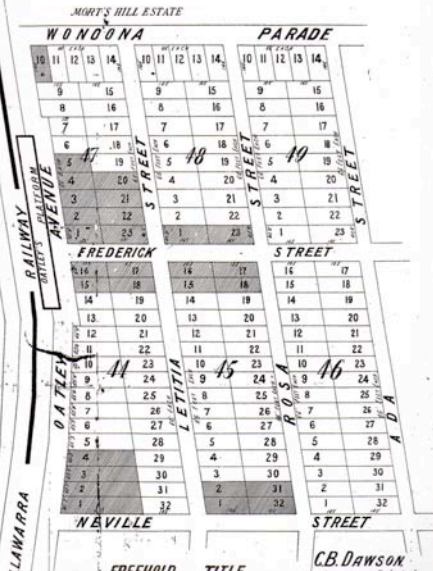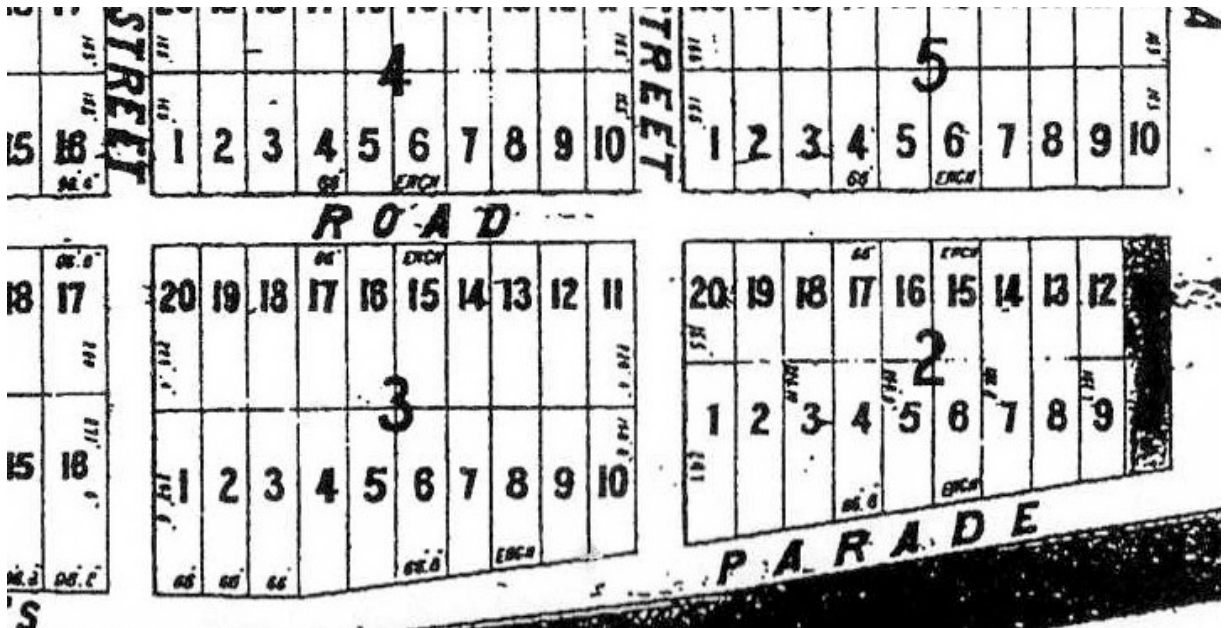1995.
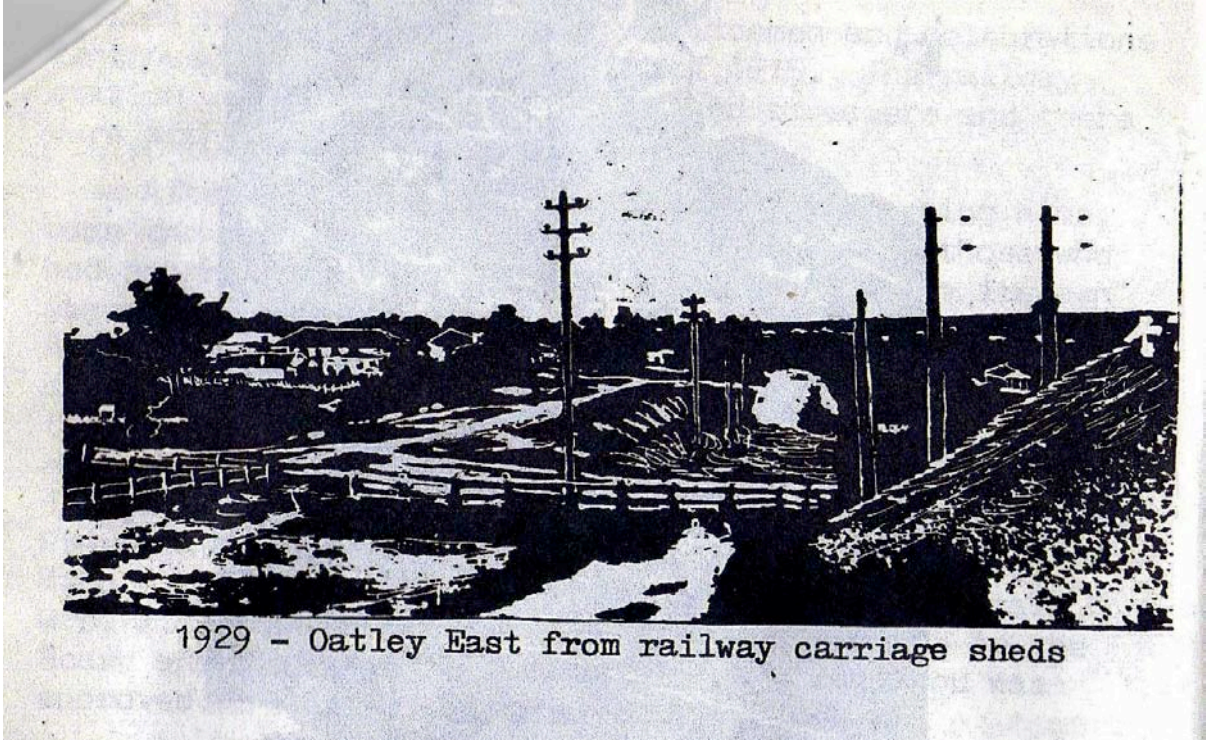
1929 – Oatley East from railway carriage sheds

GEORGE'S RIVER,

r Auction Sale, on the Ground,

SATURDAY, 23RD OCTOBER, 1886,
AT 3 O'CLOCK,

HARDIE & GORMAN,
Auctioneers

MORT'S HILL ESTATE

WONGONA PARADE

WONOONA PARADE

MULGA STREET

BOTANY BAY

PACIFIC OCEAN

SYDNEY

NOTE:—

LEVEL BUILDING LAND,
RAILWAY STATION,
VARIED VIEWS

RAILWAY

AVENUE

FREDERICK STREET

OATLEY

LETITIA

ROSA

ADA

NEVILLE STREET

STREET

C.B. DAWSON

FREEHOLD TITLE

ILLAWARRA

STREET

4

15 16 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

STREET

5

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

ROAD

18 17 | 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

15 18 | 3

2

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

PARADE

AVENUE

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 | 10 11 12 13 14

5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

47

44

23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15

FREDE

28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 | 10 11 12

STREET

Mortdale

(N) OATLEY

Train Sheds - elevated

Site from which picture in pub was taken in 1920s. Looking South.

First Railway Line

Hurstville Road

Woronora Pde East

(W) Underpass

Mulga Rd

Railway Station

Oatley Ave

natural water course in early days

Pub

Gungah Bay

Worthwhile examining topography now and as shown in photo

(E)

Clock Tower

Frederick Street

War Memorial

former level crossing

Gungah Bay

Oatley Pde

Neville Street

Scouts Hall

water pipes

To Como Bridge

To Como Bridge

(S)

Diagram – not to scale.

A.R.H.S. BULLETIN. Vol 16 . p 53

1st Oatley Railway Station

From

Crossing

H

Sydney

Level

H

No scale given