

Chapter 6

The beaches

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The Gold Coast beaches are, of course, the key interface between the terrestrial and marine ecosystems of the city. The fine-textured golden sands are one of the possible reasons for the city's name. Prior to European settlement, the beaches were a source of seafood for the indigenous people. A favourite food was the pipi (or eugary); there were also oysters, mud crabs and sea mullet during winter when the schools ran. Before the sand miners took their toll, midden heaps of pipi and oyster shells were common at places where the local people gathered to feast.

Townships surveyed

Burleigh Heads was surveyed in 1871, and in 1874–1875 the site that would become the township of Southport was surveyed. The most southerly port from Brisbane could rightly be called Southport. Its primary role was that of a 'port' from which red cedar was taken by boat to Brisbane. The first settler was Richard Gardiner, who built a house and then a wharf. Other selectors took up farming properties. Stories of excellent fishing and extensive rock oyster grounds brought numerous fishermen to Southport.

As discussed previously, the decision by the Queensland colonial governor to build his summer residence at Southport in 1885 transformed the port into a holiday destination for the 'rich and famous' of Brisbane-town. So successful was it that by Federation in 1901, Southport had a resident population of 1230, up from about 200 in the 1880s. The railway line between Beenleigh and Southport opened in 1889. Prior to that the transport options were a four-hour boat trip from Brisbane (relatively fast for the era) or the Cobb & Co. coach service which commenced in 1879.

In 1877, the first house was built on Marine Parade at Southport. It was named 'Balclutha'. The owner was concerned enough about protecting the foredunes that he retained native vegetation while clearing enough to gain that much sought-after water view – the dilemma faced ever since by beachfront property owners. Others followed, building houses in locations where they were threatened by the next cyclone or even major storm and high tide. Many were rented out at holiday periods or as weekends. Visitors who could not afford rental accommodation camped in tents adjacent to the beach. Some simply preferred camping to holidaying in a house. Beach camping became the holiday of choice for the growing working and middle classes of Brisbane.