

**Hazelhurst**  
**ARTS CENTRE**

**A HISTORY OF  
HAZELHURST ARTS CENTRE**



# THE HAZELHURST STORY

## ORIGINS

The Hazelhurst story begins, not in Australia, but in England in 1904 with the birth of Ben Broadhurst. Although his marriage certificate has his birthplace as Manchester in England, he was actually born at 16 Amos Street, Pendelton in West Salford. The north of England was famous for its textile manufacturing - hence the term 'Manchester', which is used in Australia as a generic term for linen. All Ben's family were employed in the textile industry.

He was christened Benjamin after his grand- father who was a shirt-cutter as was his father, John Preston Broadhurst, who was aged 34 at the time of his birth. His mother, Hannah Broadhurst (nee Barber), was a year older and also worked in the textile industry as a dress- maker. Little did he know, but textile would later play a major role in Ben's life too – albeit on the other side of the world.

Ben had two older brothers, Maurice who was aged nine and Jack six. He also had a sister Doris or 'Nellie', and a younger sister Frances.

By the time the 20th century was a decade old, the British textile industry was on the wane and in 1911, when Ben was seven, the Broadhursts decided to try their luck overseas. Ben was offered a partnership in South Africa, but decided that the Antipodes promised a brighter future for his sons.

## **AUSTRALIA**

Arriving in Sydney they settled in the Sydney suburb of Kogarah, where his father's reputation as a skilled shirt-maker soon secured him employment. But before the family were properly established World War 1 started and Ben's two brothers Maurice (19) and Jack (16), keen to do their bit for 'King and country,' immediately enlisted in the Australian army at Carlton.

Tragically, both brothers were killed in action. Private Maurice Broadhurst died scaling the cliffs at Lone Pine, Gallipoli on August 22nd 1915 whilst serving with the 18th Battalion. Private Jack Broadhurst of the 55th Battalion of Australian Infantry was killed in action in France on April 2nd 1917. The sheer scale of human loss in The Great war is best summed up by the statistic that of the 900 men from the St. George District who went to war with the 45th Battalion, 600 were killed in action. To lose one son is tragic enough, but two was unbearable and Ben's mother, Hannah, never recovered from the loss. As the Hazelhurst story unfolds, it becomes apparent that the tragedy also had a profound effect on young Ben Broadhurst.

## **FORMATIVE YEARS**

Back in Australia, more bad luck followed in the wake of his brother's deaths. Ben's education at Kogarah High School was curtailed at fourteen by an influenza outbreak that hit Sydney just after the end of the Great War. Unable to return to school, he worked for a bicycle manufacturer and a Pharmaceutical company until his father, who had risen from shirt-cutter to manager in England, decided to go it alone and establish his own shirt-making company.

From his premises, first in Castlereagh Street in the city and later in Newtown, John Broadhurst worked hard to ensure that his product lived up to the company's advertising slogan, 'Broadhurst - Shirts at their Best'. It was at his father's factory that Ben first saw 15 year old Lily Jackson who would later become his wife. But, unlike most other teenage boys at the factory, Ben's interests extended far beyond the mysteries of the female form.

He was a member of the WEA, or Worker's Educational Association, and by attending night school gained the Intermediate and Leaving certificates the influenza outbreak had denied him. But a lack of a formal or higher education never hindered Ben, who was able to run a successful business and had a wide range of intellectual interests. He was always a very practical, hands-on person interested in new ideas and the latest technology. With the birth of radio, he became an enthusiastic amateur builder and operator and he and a partner founded the Australian Radio College.

## **INFLUENCES**

Ben continued to read widely and often commented that he had educated himself. He is remembered as a great raconteur and lover of poetry who would reel out the verse of his favourites, 'Banjo' Patterson and Henry Lawson, at family gatherings. Like many young men of his generation, he became interested in the brave new world of Communism – until he learned of how Stalin's brutal land reforms had caused the death of millions of Ukrainian peasants. However, he remained committed to the ideals of Socialism for the rest of his life and was also an admirer

of the pacifist Mahatma Ghandi, the founder of the Scouting movement, Lord Baden-Powell, and the 'father' of theosophy, Rudolf Steiner. Ben's son, Maurice Broadhurst, says, "my father was self- educated in many fields... was a great reader, something he passed onto me..." He was "in search of something to believe in, which he could then put into practice."

In 1926, aged 22, Ben married his sweetheart, Lily, in Rockdale and their union produced two children. With the death of his father in 1936 Ben inherited the Broadhurst shirt business, which he quickly expanded by winning contracts to produce uniforms for the likes of David Jones, Sargot-Gardener and Cooe clothing. It also gave him a chance to apply his own philosophy and ideals to the real world.

Although his Newtown and other factories employed many hundreds of people, his outworkers were the less fortunate members of society – some were sick, disabled or had family members who needed constant care. But unlike the more unscrupulous entrepreneurs who would have exploited their helplessness, Ben insisted on paying them the same rate as the other able- bodied factory workers. Ben's son, Maurice, who spent his school holidays helping his father deliver materials and collect finished items from these outworkers, remembers his father gave all his off-cuts and ends to a lady who supported herself and her daughter by making clothing to sell at the local market.

In 1939, war broke out for the second time in a generation. Ben, despite losing two brothers in the Great War, enlisted almost immediately, but was rejected on the grounds that he was working in a vital industry. The army needed

uniforms and Ben had to be content to 'do his bit' on the home front. The war years were lived under intense pressure as Ben battled through long working days and tight production schedules as well as raising money for the war effort and doing charity work in the local community.

However, his marriage suffered under the stresses and strains of the war years and Ben and Lily divorced after 16 years. However, Ben remained in close contact with his family and son Maurice remembers that, 'he came with flowers every Sunday.' A few years later Ben did find happiness with 31 year-old Sydneysider Hazel Keane (nee Crealey), who, like Lily, worked in his factory. Hazel was also a divorcee and had been married to Dave Keane – Ben's head cutter. They married in 1945 and moved out to the Sutherland Shire, which was still regarded as being 'out in the sticks.'

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SUTHERLAND SHIRE**

Before colonisation by the British the Sutherland Shire was home to the Gweagal clan of the Dharawal people, who lived in coastal rock shelters. The Gweagal were the first Australians to come into contact with Captain Cook when he landed at Kurnell in 1770. After Captain Philip decided to make Port Jackson and not Botany Bay the site of the new penal colony, Sutherland Shire remained what the new colonists called terra nullius until Bass and Flinders explored it and named it Port Hacking in 1796. At this point, the Gweagal were killed, died of disease or dispersed and their land passed into Crown hands. Other than a few family holdings there was little development of the area, until 1860 when one of those

families, the Laycocks, auctioned some of their properties. Thomas Holt, a wealthy emigrant Englishman who had quickly become a 'colonial millionaire' as a result of his dealings in the lucrative Australian wool trade, meat export and railways, purchased around 5,000 acres of freehold land around what is now Sutherland. He would eventually own almost all the available land between Port Hacking and Botany Bay.

Although Holt was one of the big business tycoons of his day, held high political office and was a noted philanthropist, erecting the obelisk to commemorate Cook's landing at Kurnell at his own expense, his business judgement was somewhat lacking where his Sutherland estate was concerned. His original plan of dividing the holding into small parcels to rent to tenant farmers failed because the small Australian farmer would not subscribe to the old English, feudal-style system under a 'lord of the manor.' Refusing to be moved on this issue, Holt tried to seed a number of other enterprises instead.

With his vision, restless energy, boundless curiosity and willingness to take an entrepreneurial risk, Holt very much characterised the Victorian age. Sheep, oyster and alpaca farming and coal mining were just a few of the diverse ventures he tried his hand at on his Sutherland holding. But none of them really succeeded and by the time of his death, in 1888, the Sutherland estate was still vacant land. But even in death Holt maintained his grip over Sutherland. His estate and 99 year lease agreements held up further development of much of the Sutherland Shire until well into the 20th century when the leases ran out and the subdivision of the Holt estate could finally take place.

But notwithstanding the formidable shadow of Holt, the intensive residential development of the Shire did not begin until after World War 2. The Housing Commission, brainchild of NSW Premier and future Governor General, William Mc Kell, started acquiring land to build the much heralded 'homes fit for heroes', and Ben Chifley's Labor government fuelled the first property boom of the post-war era by offering ordinary working people cheap, long term mortgages. With the building of a train line and the proliferation of the motor car, Sutherland Shire has been slowly sucked into Metropolitan Sydney and the vortex of spiralling land and property prices. It is hard to imagine the bucolic beauty that greeted the Broadhursts when they first arrived some sixty years ago.

In 1945, the Sydney Metropolitan area ended at Tom Ugly's Bridge. There were a few remote dairy and poultry farms, grazing land and market gardens. Milk was delivered by horse-drawn cart and wild freesias, banksias, Lilli Pillis, gum-tips and blackberries grew at the side of the road where local farmers sold their produce. There was only one corner shop in Gymea and special arrangements had to be made to get items sent from big city department stores.

## **HAZELHURST**

The Broadhursts secured a block of land from an elderly couple called Smith, which was once part of the Holt estate. It was situated in the suburb of Gymea – the Gweagal name for the beautiful native lily that populates the area and formed part of their diet. A natural bushland



setting with Dent's creek running through the middle of it, Ben and Hazel's new home also boasted many fine, tall trees. It was in this rustic setting that they would give full reign to their many shared passions and beliefs. But, first, there was the small matter of building a private house in the midst of the post-war chaos and overcoming the shortage of every kind of building material and domestic fixture and fitting imaginable. Even the Housing Commission had to import items like baths, taps, toilets and fibro dwellings from England, as Australian labour and manufacturing production had not yet recovered after the war.

Maurice Broadhurst remembers that the building of the house that became known as Hazelhurst, which still stands in the gallery grounds today, presented his 'strong-willed' father with many challenges. Ben's admiration of Lord Baden Powell's scouting movement, which he joined as a young boy and remained a member of for most of his life, and the ideals of resourcefulness and self-reliance it had instilled in him were fully tested during the two-years it took to build the house.

The two-storey house, with its art deco style influences, was designed by Ben and Hazel with the help of local architect Harry Smith. The original roof design had to be changed because they could not find timber long enough to pitch the roof to the specified angle. Maurice recalls that, 'there were no bricks – so I helped my father and his father-in-law make them out of concrete at weekends.'

Similar ingenuity was also required in other areas of the house. When they found that there were no baths for purchase – they put in a sunken bath and tiled it with pre-

war stock. Kitchen units were made out of packing cases and a second-hand, pre-war stove was bought. The only choice of exterior colours was 'Federation yellow' or white, which they combined to produce a bottled cream. Even the name 'Hazelhurst' had to be custom made, because Hazel's first choice, 'Rose Cottage', had already been used to christen a neighbouring property. However, Maurice recollects that his father's resourcefulness was not appreciated by everyone. The Housing Commission declared the house broke post-war austerity rules and slapped Ben with a fine in the region of £300.

The house completed, Ben turned his attention to the garden where his first action was to plant a row of rhododendrons to mark the end of World War 2 in the Pacific in 1946. The Broadhursts also adopted three children, orphaned during a bombing raid on London. Denise and Ralph lived at Hazelhurst, whilst their sister was brought up by Hazel's mother.

Maurice always saw his father as a man, 'ahead of his time, a free-thinker who thought outside the square' and certainly the vegetarian Ben Broadhurst, who practiced re-cycling and organic farming, was a 'greenie' long before it was fashionable. These beliefs were central to the teachings of another of his 'mentors', Rudolf Steiner. Steiner believed everything was related to the soil and in the 1920's was advocating practices that now have become accepted, such as composting and septic tanks. Because Ben used compost to nourish the many flowers and vegetables he grew, the grounds were always beautifully landscaped with a wild profusion of colours and scents. Hazelhurst also boasted the first indoor dunny in the 'Shire thanks to the septic tank he installed.

These unorthodox beliefs and practices actually saved 'Hazelhurst' when Ben again clashed with the Housing Commission, who began the compulsory purchase of land in the Sutherland Shire. To thwart any designs they had on his land, he registered it as a farm, which was protected from development, and very much in keeping with Ben and Hazel's original vision of Hazelhurst.

To retain their 'farm' status the Broadhursts had to keep animals on their land, which at various times consisted of two goats, two hundred chickens and a chestnut pony called Skipper, which local kids would slip through the fence to ride on their way to school. There was also a cow named Ruby who provided rich milk for the butter and cheeses they made in their own little dairy. An orchard bearing soft fruits such as pears, peaches, apples and strawberries completed their little Garden of Eden.

Maurice Broadhurst says that having built a successful business, his father decided to retire in 1960, at the relatively young age of fifty six, to concentrate on his other interests and commitments, such as his long-time Presidency of the Sutherland Spastic Centre. Success had never dulled his principles and the final act of his business saw him do what Karl Marx had advocated and put the means of production into the hands of the workers – literally! When he closed the factory, which was by that point located in a fibro building in Flora Street, Sutherland, Ben allowed his staff to keep the valuable machinery from the factory to either sell or start their own business. Local artist, David Rankin, whose grandmother, father and mother all worked for the Broadhursts as maids and gardeners concurs that such an act was typical of Ben, who he recalled as having, '... an incredible breadth of

mind, imagination and a great generosity of spirit.' He recalls that the Broadhursts often took their staff on holidays with them.

Although the Broadhursts were successful, well-respected business people who were involved in local charities and gave much of their precious spare time to worthy causes, their psychic interests gave rise to many unfounded rumours. Dix Hawk was the Canadian cousin of the war orphans adopted by the Broadhursts. Through this family connection she also came to live at Hazelhurst in the 1960's and became a close friend of the family. Of these rumours she says:

'We heard a lot of stories about the house that were a lot more interesting than the truth, that it was: a brothel; a sly grog joint (when grog joints were still around); and a gambling den. There were rumours about how the people who lived there had died - a little premature as at that time we were still living in it! It was rumoured to be a hundred years old - some rumours placed the age of the house so old that it would have had to be built by Aborigines!

It had a reputation for being haunted. There were a couple of ghosts but these were of people who had a connection with the family [rather than a connection with the house]. They weren't unfriendly ghosts.'

Ben and Hazel had a long-standing interest in numerology, astrology, extra-sensory perception and various other psychic phenomena. Ben was President of the Sydney Centre for Psychic Research for some time in the 1950's. Dix maintains that these interests dated back to the time

when Ben's brothers, Maurice and Jack, were killed in the Great War and was heightened by another family tragedy – the death of Hazel and Ben's son, Jimmy, who was born in 1950, but died when he was only four.

In several newspaper articles Ben talked honestly and openly about this aspect of their lives. He revealed that séances were often held at Hazelhurst, they were in regular touch with the spirit world and during one session Ben contacted his dead brothers. To prove that the contact was genuine, his brother gave him classified information about the men who died with him on the battlefield, which was checked and verified by the Army. He also claimed that he had contacted Jimmy and that he had told him that he 'was happy on the other side' and described the journey departed souls took in the afterlife. Ben maintained that although he was an agnostic, he did believe in an afterlife and saw his psychic interests as a 'natural search for an answer.' And supernatural powers were not just the preserve of humans. It was also reported that Dix's German shepherd was able to use psychic intuition to find lost items, sometimes miles from the location in which they were last seen.

## **THE GIFT**

By the late 1970's old age, ill health and spiralling costs prevented the Broadhursts maintaining the large grounds as they once had, but Ben and Hazel lived out their lives in the rambling Arcadia of Hazelhurst, whilst the world around them changed beyond recognition. All the small holdings that had once surrounded them had long since been sold, sub-divided and built on.

The Broadhursts, appalled by the relentless march of property development, decided to leave the last piece of green space in Gymea to the public. In 1980 an agreement was reached with the Sutherland Shire Council to maintain Hazelhurst during the remainder of their lives and to open it up to the public after their deaths. So rare was their gesture that a special bill had to be passed through Parliament to allow the bequest. At the time of their deaths, Ben in 1990 and Hazel in 1994, the land and property was estimated to be worth \$4-5 million, but son, Maurice, fully supported his father's decision, 'He wanted to keep it as it was. To us and our children it was a secret garden and he didn't want to spoil it.'

## **A NEW BEGINNING**

During the negotiations Ben and Hazel had specified that Hazelhurst should either be 'a place of culture', or a community facility, so the Sutherland Shire Council started a process of public consultation. The popular consensus was that Hazelhurst should become an art gallery, not a cavernous exhibition space, but a place where local people could also come to create and find a platform to exhibit their art. From this, the vision of Hazelhurst slowly evolved into a multi-functional arts facility that gave equal weight to exhibiting borrowed and touring collections and hosting creative workshops.

With \$7 million of Council money and a \$1 million grant from the Federal Government, building work on the new gallery and workshops began in 1998 and the newly-named 'Hazelhurst Retreat' was formally opened on February 26th, 2000. The rectangular, low-rise buildings

were designed to preserve as much open space and Hazelhurst's original garden atmosphere as possible. Giles Auty, art critic of *The Australian* newspaper, said of the finished development: 'I sense the former owners would have been thrilled by the unobtrusive but sympathetic way the new buildings sit in the landscape.' This feeling is endorsed by Maurice Broadhurst, who has himself attended art classes at the Retreat: 'It's a nice place for people to find a creative outlet... I think they (Ben and Hazel) would have been pleased with the way it turned out.'

Hazelhurst has already contributed significantly to the cultural and social life of southern Sydney. It is not only considered to be the first public arts facility of its kind in Australia, but provides a level of gallery and art centre function unmatched by any similar complex in the country. Its wide-ranging and popular mix of exhibitions, courses and amenities had attracted an estimated 2.5 million visitors by the end of 2015.

Hazelhurst is part of a nationwide network of public galleries. With a changeover frequency of six to eight weeks and the space to hold three exhibitions at a time, a varied and vibrant programme offers a mix of touring and self initiated shows and displays work of local, state, national and international prominence.

On a practical creative level, its six multi purpose studio workshops run classes in a wide range of arts & crafts, such as painting, drawing, ceramics, sculpture, printmaking and jewellery-making.

Hazelhurst Cottage has been retained as a historical focus for the garden and contains artist-in-residence accommodation, a 'friends & volunteers' meeting room, staff room and a new-media studio for digital arts.

The theatrette seats 65 people and is used for meetings, performances and lectures.

The Community Gallery is operated on a commercial and 'for hire' basis, servicing both individual artists and groups.

The Gallery Café with views over the Gardens and seating for 120 people has become a popular place to meet and eat.

The gardens provide an attractive backdrop for a range of creative and commercial activities such as art and photography, weddings and outdoor markets, and offer an atmospheric natural setting for the presentation of sculpture as part of the gallery exhibition program.



## **A FINAL THOUGHT...**

Ben and Hazel Broadhurst practiced what they preached, as demonstrated by the generous gift they left to the people of the Sutherland Shire. Whatever their personal beliefs and philosophical motivations, the Broadhursts served both their country and community selflessly and with an open heart - a claim very few could equal. This sentiment was echoed by critic Giles Auty in his article on the official opening of the Hazelhurst Retreat:

'If we are still allowed to consider generosity and altruism as virtues in our brave new-millennial, post-modern age, the thanks of everyone should go to Ben and Hazel Broadhurst, who dreamed of sharing their extensive property one day with the local community.'

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# Hazelhurst

SUTHERLANDSHIRE  
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