

Bulletin struggled early but boomed with the Gold Coast

By Rod Kirkpatrick

The second-biggest selling provincial daily newspaper in the nation is a paper that reflects the lifestyle choices Australians have been making over the previous three decades. They have been converging on the coast to work, to play and to retire.

And nowhere is the coastal lifestyle more attractive than in south-east Queensland, specifically on the Gold Coast, between Brisbane and the NSW border. The strip between Southport and Coolangatta, centring on Surfers Paradise, has been transformed from mainly weekenders and holiday cottages into a bustling city and high-rise heaven. Skyscraper units abound, as do canal developments for those wanting a house, yard and boat.

The newspaper cashing in on the amazing development has been the *Gold Coast Bulletin*, whose circulation topped 45,000 in the first half of 2001. When Roy Miller, who had been the editor of Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph* for eight years, arrived at the *Gold Coast Bulletin* as managing director in March 1999, he thought the paper was a little schizophrenic.

"It didn't know whether it wanted to be a suburban, regional or metropolitan newspaper," he said. Within a year the paper had a new masthead, fresh design and a clear goal: to be the best regional paper in Australia. It certainly has more zest than the rest.

Miller introduced a 24-page sports liftout on Mondays, a fashion and lifestyle magazine on Tuesdays, a health supplement on Wednesdays, a new-look television guide and entertainment magazine for Thursdays and a motoring liftout for Fridays.

The *Bulletin* did not have the strong dynastic foundations in early years that many of today's strong regional dailies have had. Its identity changed frequently over the years, almost as frequently as its ownership in early years.

The paper began at Southport on March 28, 1885, as the *South Queensland Bulletin*, with Patrick Joseph Macnamara as proprietor and editor. There was already a paper at Beenleigh, the *Logan Witness and Southern Districts Advertiser*, which began on February 9, 1878, and later became the *Logan and Albert Sentinel*.

While developing his newspaper and printery, Macnamara became involved in community affairs. In 1888 Macnamara stood unsuccessfully for the newly created Queensland electorate of Albert and waged his campaign through the columns of the *Bulletin*. In 1891 he was elected to the Southport Shire Council and in 1892 became its president.

There are no extant files showing when Macnamara's proprietorship of the paper ended, but he – with wife Isabella and their six children – joined the ill-fated expedition in 1893 to establish a New Australia in Paraguay.

A group of Southport business people, trading as Davenport Newspapers, continued the newspaper and printery. One of those involved was Helena Davenport, who, with her mother, was conducting a private department school for girls at Southport. Helena wrote all the leading articles for the *Bulletin*.

There were other changes of ownership before James Shepherd bought it on September 1, 1895, and changed the title to the *Logan and Albert Bulletin*. W.D. Mellor joined Shepherd in the proprietary and they launched the *Beaudesert Herald* on July 28, 1904. They published the *Herald* on Fridays and the *Bulletin* on Saturdays.

Mellor became the sole proprietor of the two papers in 1905 and sold in 1908 to Edward Fass, formerly associated with the *Tweed Heads and Coolangatta Star*. Fass, who became Southport's second mayor, maintained a controlling interest in the *Bulletin* until 1914 and then again briefly in 1918.

Ownership arrangements changed a number of times between 1914 and 1918. A company, with local people as directors, operated the paper in 1919. Fass was a shareholder.

A family connection that was to bring greater stability to the *Bulletin* was initiated in 1908. Walter Vincent Rootes (1889-1970) who had worked for seven years on the *Manilla Express*, near Tamworth, NSW, joined the *Logan and Albert Bulletin* as a compositor in 1908, returned in 1912, left again and returned in 1918.

In between, he worked on the daily *Darling Downs Gazette* in Toowoomba, the tri-weekly *Warwick Argus* and the daily *Brisbane Courier*. Rootes married Georgina Alice Lather, of Lutheran stock, in 1912 at Toowoomba, and they had four children: Walter Charles, John Herbert, Thomas Ormond and Joan Olive.

Rootes became a director of the *Bulletin* on November 8, 1919, after buying an interest in the paper. Despite various changes in ownership over the next 50 years, Rootes continued to serve the company in management roles until he died on February 12, 1970. John Herbert Rootes (1914-1993) worked for the *Bulletin* for 59 years, and served as company secretary, 1951-60, manager 1953-60, managing director 1961-82, and chairman 1983-86. He and his two brothers had become directors of the company in 1945.

Title changes occurred in the 20th century when the *Logan and Albert Bulletin* became the *South Coast Bulletin* on December 21, 1928, and the *Gold Coast Bulletin* on May 8, 1963. The second of these changes occurred three years after a significant change of ownership. Gold Coast Publications Pty Ltd, a subsidiary of Northern Star Holdings Ltd, Lismore, was formed in December 1959 to acquire the interests of South Coast Bulletin Pty Ltd., which was publishing the weekly *South Coast Bulletin*.

Both Northern Star Limited and The Tweed Newspaper Company Pty Ltd, publishers of dailies at Lismore and Murwillumbah, respectively, held 26.5 per cent of the 56,652 shares, and various local shareholders held the remaining shares. The new company set about attracting some experienced journalists and made the *Bulletin* a bi-weekly from April 5, 1961. There were six journalists and 22 district correspondents. The paper produced 96 pages a week and circulation was 8,000.

From April 2, 1968, the *Gold Coast Bulletin* appeared four times a week, Tuesdays to Fridays. In December 1969 Gold Coast Publications became a wholly owned subsidiary of the Lismore-based Northern Star Holdings Ltd when the holding company bought the local shareholders' interests. From August 11, 1970, the *Bulletin* left the letterpress era behind when it was printed on a web offset press.

The *Bulletin* introduced a Saturday edition on July 6, 1974, making it, effectively, a daily. Managing director John Rootes rode an elephant through the streets of Southport to publicise the first Saturday edition. In 1981 the *Bulletin's* management began seriously considering introducing Sunday and Monday editions, even though "Sunday papers as a whole were not regarded as practical in a provincial area and Monday editions were generally regarded as unprofitable by most [Regional Dailies of Australia] members".

The managers told their board the additional issues would be "the best way to combat the intrusion of other papers into the Gold Coast area, including the *Sunday Sun*, Brisbane, which had announced its intention of starting a *Daily Sun*". They saw the *Sunday Bulletin* as a vehicle to siphon off some of the real estate, classified, amusement, motor-vehicle and boat advertising which was making the Saturday edition so big and straining production facilities.

Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd launched the *Daily Sun* in Brisbane on August 2, 1982, competing in the morning market against the *Courier-Mail*, which was 40 per cent owned by the Herald & Weekly Times Ltd. On September 12 and 13, 1982, during the Brisbane Commonwealth Games, the *Bulletin* introduced the much-promoted Sunday and Monday editions.

The glamour of the Games masked the recession that had begun to make its presence felt on the Gold Coast and throughout the rest of Australia. Real estate and classified advertising fell dramatically. The number of classified advertising pages in Saturday's issue fell by eight pages. Simultaneously, staffing levels were allowed to increase beyond agreed levels.

Profits became losses and with the November figures came the realisation that staff had to be cut. Thirty-nine employees were retrenched in December 1982. Four issues of the *Bulletin* did not appear when staff went on strike in protest, costing the company about \$150,000 in revenue. Another \$70,00 was paid out to retrenched staff. A revised profit-and-loss budget for

the period to June 30, 1983, presented to the board in December, seemed to suggest the staff reductions would allow the company to return to profitability in March 1983 with prospects of considerable growth by June.

But there was growing disquiet among directors of the holding company and the group general manager (finance), his assistant and two outside financial advisers inspected the *Bulletin's* accounts and budgets. The advisers were "very critical of *Bulletin* administration and accounting and claimed management was incompetent in this regard".

Serious inaccuracies were found in accounting records and there were errors of gross miscalculations in budgets, including an understatement of wages to the extent of \$200,000 to the end of June 1983. The advisers believed the *Bulletin* should revert immediately to five-day-a-week publication. The two additional issues had contributed significantly to losses of \$1.2 million.

The board was left with no option but to cease seven-day-a-week publication in April 1983. It reverted to publishing five days a week from Tuesday, May 3, 1983. Industrial strife, including a journalists' walkout, occurred as the management and unions negotiated the terms for retrenching at least another 62 employees at an eventual cost of about \$250,000.

A Monday edition was reintroduced on October 17, 1988, and has continued to this day. The return to Monday publication was heavily promoted with the paper declaring that the "Monday edition will be a vital link in a new era *Gold Coast Bulletin* aimed at servicing the changing needs of a dynamic growth area destined to be Australia's sixth largest city".

For 17 years from March 8, 1961, the *Bulletin* was printed at the *Daily News* plant in Murwillumbah for economic and production-quality reasons. The *Daily News*, formerly the *Tweed Daily*, had installed a Duplex Tubular Rotary press. The *Bulletin* was wholly set up at Southport and the flongs made there before being transported by car the 60km to Murwillumbah where metal stereo plates were made from the flongs and attached to the press for printing.

If everything went to plan, the finished papers were delivered to newsagents and shops in the Southport district by 4am. Sometimes, though, the drivers had to contend with floods, storms and even cyclones, necessitating the use of four-wheel drive vehicles – in the days before they were trendy vehicles largely bought by city drivers – and even boats. If floods had cut the main road at the Murwillumbah end, a local driver would meet the Southport driver at the Kingscliff Hotel and make the transfer because the local man knew the way back along bush roads to Murwillumbah.

In 1961, when Jack Harvey and John Burton joined the *Bulletin*, Surfer's Paradise had one skyscraper and no traffic lights. Harvey, a journalist for 28 years, joined the *Bulletin* in January 1961 and was appointed editor nine months later. He continued in that role until March 1979. He had been a war correspondent, 1942-46, for the Sydney *Daily Mirror* and *Truth* chain, and then served in turn as columnist, chief sub-editor and news editor of Brisbane *Truth*.

Burton, who had also joined the paper in 1961, succeeded Harvey. Burton began his career at the *Tenterfield Star*, NSW, in 1949 and worked on provincial papers for six years before spending six years at Brisbane's *Courier-Mail*. Burton edited the *Bulletin* for 17 years, retiring in July 1996.

In February 1965 Gold Coast Publications Pty Ltd acquired a large shareholding in Tweed Radio and Broadcasting Pty Ltd. In December 1969, Gold Coast Publications Pty Ltd became a wholly owned subsidiary of Northern Star Holdings Ltd when the holding company bought the coast shareholders' interests.

In March 1978 the *Bulletin* spent \$3.5 million on moving out of its Bulletin Arcade premises in the heart of Southport and relocating on an industrial estate in Nerang Road, Molendinar, west of Southport. Since 1957 the *Bulletin* had occupied the Southport premises, but they had become cramped for space and development.

At Molendinar, the streamlined two-building complex on a three-acre site included a \$1 million Goss Urbanite eight-unit press. The *Bulletin* had 166 full-time staff with an annual payroll of more than \$1.7 million. In 1982 the press was enlarged to 10 units, with increased

colour capacity, so that it could produce a 112-page newspaper with 48 pages of colour in one run.

Twenty years later, the *Bulletin* began building a state-of-the-art print centre adjacent to the existing building at Molendinar. Last July Queensland Premier Peter Beattie officially opened the new \$42 million centre, which allows the *Bulletin* to print 144 pages of back-to-back colour, claimed to be a first in Australia.

In the final few years of the twentieth century, the editorial thrust of the *Gold Coast Bulletin* was entrusted to Robert Henry Gordon, who had edited the *Sunday Mail*, Brisbane, for nine years. Gordon, always known as Bob, had livened up the broadsheet *Sunday Mail* to help it claw back some of the significant circulation lead that the tabloid *Sunday Sun* had opened up by the mid-1980s.

As editor-in-chief of the *Gold Coast Bulletin* from February 1997, Gordon set out to edit “the whole paper” – to worry about all sections of the paper, not merely the front hard-news section and the editorial and opinion pages. He treats the front page as you would a magazine cover, focusing on one issue and exploiting colour superbly.

The week-day *Gold Coast Bulletin* averaged 41,211 copies for the final six months of 2004 and the *Weekend Bulletin* averaged 76,586. Among regional dailies, this was second only to the *Herald*, which serves the Newcastle, Hunter and Central Coast, but the week-day *Bulletin*'s sales were ahead of two so-called metropolitan dailies, the *Canberra Times* and the *Northern Territory News*, Darwin. The *Weekend Bulletin*'s sales were well ahead of the Saturday sales of the Canberra, Darwin and Hobart dailies.

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