

To make a donation to the **Friends of the Bear Pit**, click on '**Donations**' tab on the SGHS website and scroll down for instructions

## History of The Bear Pit at Sydney Girls High School

Prior to Sydney Girls High School's move to Moore Park in 1921, the school's site was occupied by the Moore Park Zoological Gardens, the predecessor of the world-renowned Taronga Zoo. The Moore Park Zoological Gardens, were officially closed after more than 33 years of operations, on 1 September 1916, with more than 1000 mammals, birds and reptiles being progressively moved to Taronga before construction began on the new school. The vast majority of the old Zoo buildings, with the notable exception of the Gatekeepers Lodge and two Bear Pits, were demolished to make way for the new SGHS School which, prior to 1928, occupied the entire Zoo site, before SBHS joined SGHS at Moore Park in 1928.



*SGHS Bear Pit with the Gatekeepers lodge in the background and girls in the Lowers, 1927, Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales*

Today, the two "Bear Pits," one in each of SGHS and SBHS grounds, are the last remaining relics of the Moore Park Zoological Gardens. The SGHS "Bear Pit", which includes a small sleeping den and flight of stone stairs on either side, was constructed in 1891 of stone, brick and cement. It was located immediately in front of the Main Entrance to the Zoo thus presenting both an attractive

feature exhibit and a convenient means of moving patrons from the upper terrace to the lower terrace and lake. The Annual Reports of the New South Wales Zoological Society for 1891 and 1892, describe the SGHS Bear Pit and stairs as “fine and handsome” and as “ornaments to the Gardens,” which “admirably serve the purpose for which they were built.” Besides regular paint upgrades, no structural changes were made to the SGHS Bear Pit, until a brick and cement water trough and new fittings were added in 1906.



*American Black Bears in the SGHS Bear Pit, photograph by Arthur Wigram Allen, 5 May 1900, from the Allen Family Album, Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales*

The SGHS Bear Pit was initially the home of a pair of American Black Bears, although only one of them was black, the other being of the Cinnamon coloured variety. American Black Bears are very good climbers and a large wooden pole with “cleats” on either side, was included to provide an opportunity for exercise for the Bears. This feature had the added benefit of presenting the Bears, when at the top of the pole, almost entirely above the pit itself for new Zoo entrants to observe with awe.





*Isabelline Bear at Moore Park Zoological Gardens, 1905, Annual Report NSW Zoological Society 1905, Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales*

Unlike today, visitors frequently fed the Zoo animals and the Bears were typically offered peanuts and other assorted food items, sold by vendors conveniently positioned just outside the main entrance to the Zoo.

All of the Bears from the Moore Park Zoological Gardens, including the Polar Bears, Grizzly Bears and Black Bears were relocated to Taronga Zoo in 1916 and the Bear Pits were abandoned and in a state of disrepair by the time SGHS commenced at Moore Park in August 1921.



*Aerial view of SGHS within the old Moore Park Zoological Gardens site between 1921 and 1926. Detail from Milton Kent aerial photograph, Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales.*

It is reported that the SGHS Bear Pit was subsequently used as a place to confine girls for misbehaviour and as a place for boys and girls to smoke cigarettes and other illicit behaviour, but we do know that it was certainly used as a venue for “Eurythmics,” a form of dance and exercise, which was added to the NSW curriculum in the 1920’s.



*SGHS girls practising “Eurythmics” at the SGHS Bear Pit at Moore Park, 1924,  
National Library of Australia*

Possibly as late as the early 1920’s, the SGHS Bear pit was converted into a fernery, complete with a corrugated iron roof. By the early 1990’s the fernery had fallen into disrepair and, John Stott the Treasurer of the SGHS P&C lead the “Bear Pit Restoration Group” of “committed parents, teachers, students and Old Girls” in a restoration effort, which included removing the fernery, repairing the metal work and repainting the Bear Pit, which coincided with the opening of the Maragret Varady Wing on 18 October 1996.