

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6637

Beaurepaire, Lily

(1892 - 1979)

Nationality	Australian
Born	15 September, 1892, Albert Park Victoria Australia
Died	24 November, 1979, Geelong Victoria Australia
Occupation	Community activist, Diver, Lifesaver, Olympian, Sportswoman, Swimmer

Summary

Lily Beaurepaire was one of Australia's first women Olympians, when she competed at the 1920 Antwerp Olympics in swimming and diving. She was the first Australian woman to compete in diving but was unplaced.

The only woman in Australia's small team, she joined her brother Frank and they were the first sibling Olympians. Frank, (later Sir Frank Beaurepaire), was already an Olympian from the 1908 Games. During WW1, the 1920s and into the 1930s, Lily, Frank, and May Cox, the Education Department of Victoria's Supervisor of Swimming and Lifesaving, promoted swimming and diving at exhibitions which raised patriotic funds and supported the Victorian community through charity events.

A strong swimmer, over short and long distances, Lily competed in the sea, surf and swimming baths, was a fearless high diver and leapt off bridges into rivers. In 1910, Lily was one of the first people to be qualified as a lifesaver when she gained the Bronze Medallion for Lifesaving awarded by the Royal Australian Lifesaving Association. For a decade she was sometimes the only lifesaver at Lorne surf beach.

In 1933, aged in her forties, she won fame for a dangerous lifesaving rescue of three men in rough seas. In 1967, Lorne's Lilian Beaurepaire Memorial Swimming Pool was opened.

Details

Lily Beaurepaire was born in 1892 in Albert Park. Her parents were Francis Edmund de Beaurepaire, a sailor, tram-conductor, trader and a hotel proprietor and Mary Edith, nee Inman. She attended Albert Park State School until she was 15 years old. Her brother, Frank was one year older, and as students they were State Swimming Champions. Aged 17 in 1908, he represented Australia at London's Olympic Games. Lily was a strong, versatile swimmer and award-winning diver. She was coached at school by her teacher May Cox, who would go on to be the Education Department of Victoria's Supervisor of Swimming and Lifesaving. For decades, Lily, Frank and May collaborated in the promotion of swimming and lifesaving across Victoria.

Albert Park State School was famous as it was Victoria's leading swimming school. Since 1898 it regularly won state championships. Lily was in the school's championship team in 1905, 1906 and 1908, winning First Prizes for swimming and diving in the state championships. After leaving school she raced as a teenager in open state and interstate competitions, over varied distances, and in diving. Aquatic events were popular, and many competitions were organised at Hegarty's and Stubbs Baths, in St Kilda, and other centres, including Richmond, Brunswick, Williamstown, and the City Baths. Local and interstate newspapers regularly reported on swimming carnivals. By 1910, aged 18, Lily had won 16 state level championship medals. Her swimming skills and physical strengths were rewarded further in 1910, when she was one of the first people in Victoria to qualify for the Bronze Medallion for Lifesaving and in 1911, she gained the Royal Life Saving Society's Award of Merit.

Swimming and lifesaving clubs held regular events. During WW1 they organised swimming carnivals to raise funds for charities and the patriotic war effort. In 1916 The Brunswick Baths held a carnival, for the St John's Ambulance Association.

In 1917, Footscray Swimming Club held a gala on the Maribyrnong River and in 1917 the Richmond Ladies Life Saving team displayed lifesaving techniques.

Lily was the Albert Park Ladies Swimming Club's (APLSC) efficient Honorary Secretary for nine years. It involved managing, fund raising and organising. During the World War 1 years (1914-1918) fewer swimming events were held, due to male swimmers serving in the forces. The 1916 Olympic Games were cancelled. Women swimmers, led by Lily Beaurepaire, considered that they should keep the sport 'before the public'. The APLSC requested to join the Victorian Amateur Swimming Association. Their request was refused so they formed the Victorian Lady's Amateur Swimming Association (VLASA). The women's clubs, after some negotiation all joined in 1916. From then the VLASA conducted its own championship races.

This pioneering organisation was influential as it promoted women's sport and raised funds to send women swimmers interstate and overseas. Lily was the VLASA's inaugural honorary secretary. She continued as the APLSC's secretary too. In 1917, as the VLASA's honorary secretary, Lily wrote in the Weekly Times that swimming and lifesaving should be compulsory for girls in schools. She argued that it needed to be properly taught and it was important for developing a 'fondness for physical recreation' which was 'beneficial' to health and could prevent drowning.

The VLASA affiliated with interstate women's associations and in 1917, held its first state championships at the City Baths. Lily easily won the 220 yards which qualified her to represent Victoria in the national championships. Unusually for a woman Lily used the trudgeon stroke for racing. Swimmers in the Olympic Games used it for Freestyle events because it was the fastest stroke and eventually it developed into the 'Crawl' or 'Freestyle'.

Lily was beaten in national racing by the seasoned competitive swimmer, and Olympian, Fanny Durack. She had won a gold medal in 1912, making her the first Australian woman to win a gold medal for swimming at the Olympics and the first woman in the world.

In early 1920, the VLASA decided to support Lily to compete in the next Olympics to be held in Antwerp. The Australian Olympic Council whose membership was representatives of male amateur sporting bodies, had already decided not to send a team of women swimmers due to lack of funds so she would need to pay her own way. The VLASA established an appeal for £100 to defray her living and general expenses. Newspapers advertised for donations. She paid her own ship-fare and was chaperoned by her mother. As Frank was in the men's Olympic team, they were the first siblings to represent Australia in the Olympics.

A few months earlier though, Fanny Durack had intended to defend her 1912 title. As the Olympics were cancelled in 1916, 1920 was her first opportunity to do so. However, Fanny became very ill before she left Australia. She had an emergency appendectomy, followed by typhoid fever and pneumonia. Luckily Fanny recovered but retired from competition. Lily had come second to her in the last Australian championships. The VLASA described her as 'a thorough amateur and a credit to her country'.

At the Olympics she raced in the 100-metres, and the 300-metres freestyle events as well as the 10-metre platform diving but failed to win a place. While overseas she competed in England, South Africa, the United States and Canada. On the way home Frank and Lily gave swimming and diving exhibitions in New Zealand. Upon her return, she retired from competitive swimming. Unfortunately, most of her swimming feats were left unrecorded other than unofficially in newspapers, as it would be 1930 before women's swimming times were recognised by the Victorian Amateur Swimming Association.

In 1922, Lily moved with her parents from Albert Park to Lorne. She assisted with managing the popular Carinya Guest House and later the large Cumberland Hotel. However, she continued swimming and lifesaving pursuits. At Lorne's surf beach Lily was often the only lifesaver and she was credited with 50 rescues. Organising swimming and life-saving demonstrations with local swimming clubs, including Torquay, Rippleside and Geelong, she supported charities such as the Lorne Bush Nursing Hospital. When available she worked on Education Department swimming and lifesaving programs for teachers and students.

Aged 41, she famously rescued three men in rough surf at Lorne, in 1933. Described by newspapers across Australia, as a thrilling rescue, there were three men who were dangerously carried out to sea on a Hawaiian surfboard. Lily brought them in from 300 yards out. Newspapers across Australia reported the rescue.

In 1936, Lily married Herbert Clarke and from then she was rarely found in the public record. However, in 1967, the Lillian Beaurepaire Memorial Swimming Pool was proudly opened for community use on the Lorne Foreshore, by her nephew Ian Beaurepaire, a Melbourne City Councillor. Partially funded by the Beaurepaire family who had worked in Lorne since 1922, she attended the opening with her husband. Aged 89, she died in 1979 at Chesterfield Private Hospital, Geelong.

Sadly, it was recently revealed that the memorial pool was updated and renamed the Lorne Sea Baths. However, early in 2021 the Surf Coast Council announced their intention to name a new road, Lillian Close, in her honour. Local Councillor, Gary Allen said 'Lillian was a strong but humble person who served our community well, and its with a great deal of pleasure that I move this motion'.

Events

1920 - 1920

Author Details

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