



How the bridge became the focus of festivities

Historian **Hannah Forsyth** tracks the party over the decades from the GPO clock tower to Kings Cross then Circular Quay.

Seeing in the new year by watching fireworks explode over the Harbour Bridge has become such an iconic experience, it is easy to imagine that is how Sydney has always celebrated the occasion. But the annual mass pilgrimage to the harbour foreshore is relatively new. The bridge only became a staging point for the New Year's Eve fireworks in the 1990s.

Contemporary New Year's Eve began in 1977. It was then that the state's Waratah Festival, which had begun in the '50s, was rebranded the Festival of Sydney and relaunched with fireworks on New Year's Eve.

However, the people of Sydney were not immediately persuaded.

At the time, Kings Cross was the centre of New Year's Eve. It started during World War II, fuelled by the sexy combination of bohemian residents, sly grog and men – particularly Americans – in uniform. The Americans drew the attractive girls, who – then, as now – were a magnet for everyone else. Crowds drank, danced and flirted in numbers, keeping police on their toes.

The authorities were surprised by the sudden appearance of New Year's Eve celebrations in Kings Cross during the war, for they had expected celebrations to be where they had always been – in the city centre. This was where New Year's Eve in Sydney began, at the end of the 19th century.

In the mid-19th century, New Year's Eve was celebrated more privately. Groups gathered around bonfires at night but the primary celebration was the New Year's Day picnic.

Crowds began to gather as the city became better lit. Shop lights led people to congregate in George Street in increasing numbers. Then, in 1896, when Sydney Council installed brighter gaslights in the streets, the celebration exploded into the large urban festival it is now. The tradition for more than a decade was to crowd the city streets, moving at midnight to the new, modern clock tower at the General Post Office.

Refocusing Sydney from Kings Cross to an official New Year's Eve at Circular Quay was difficult. It was not until 1987 that *The Sydney Morning Herald* described Kings Cross as quieter than the harbourside crowd.

New Year's Eve at the harbour had a troubled beginning with street violence. Businesses in The Rocks, plagued by rioting revellers, begged Sydney Festival organisers to cancel New Year's Eve fireworks, offering to pay them to move the fireworks to about 8.30pm on New Year's Day.

For the Bicentenary in 1988, then Sydney Festival director Stephen Hall recommended no New Year fireworks. "Unfortunately, in our society, New Year's Eve has become a night for drunken carousing and little else," he said.

However, family-friendly fireworks throughout the bicentennial year were so successful, organisers felt confident enough to stage a 9pm show for children. Since then, the current tradition has prevailed.

Hannah Forsyth is the author of the New Year's Eve entry for online historical site dictionaryofsydney.org.



Crowd-pleaser ... New Year's Eve at Kings Cross in 1940. Photo: Harry Martin