

Basic Detail Report

ANMS1033[021]

Title

Dried flying fish fin in envelope

Date

1906

Medium

Pencil on paper, fish fin

Dimensions

Overall: 93 x 122 mm

Name

Envelope

History

Beatrice Maude Kerr (1887-1971) was a champion Australian swimmer, diver and vaudeville entertainer. Born on 30 November 1887 at Williamstown, Melbourne, she was the eldest child of bookkeeper Alexander Robert Kerr and his wife Eliza Sophia née Clark. Kerr was raised at Albert Park where her mother taught Beatrice and her siblings to swim from an early age. Kerr began competitive swimming at Geelong and in Melbourne at Brighton and Albert Park. In 1905 she won medals in the Victorian Championships for the 110 yards (91.4 m) and 120 yards (109.7m) events and a gold bangle for the Australasian Amateur Championship. In the same year she completed 366 swimming and diving performances during a twenty week season at the Princes Court pleasure gardens in Melbourne. She was a rival of Annette Kellerman who judged Kerr in a diving event at Brighton Baths where Kerr took out first place. During a six week tour to Adelaide, Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie and Perth in 1906, Kerr won five open championships, entered forty-three races and won forty-three prizes. She was accompanied on tour by her sister and brother-in-law who acted as her manager. In order to consolidate her professional swimming career Kerr sailed from Perth to London in 1906. She stayed in Britain for five years performing in public baths during the English swimming season (from Easter to October) and at theatres and other venues during the winter months. She appeared in theatrical swimming events such as the 'Treasure Ship' at venues including the Olympia, Liverpool, and the Manchester and London Hippodromes, earning between £9 and £14 a week. Her performances included demonstrations of a range of swimming strokes and dives including the trugdeon, single over-arm stroke, side stroke, back stroke, the stand-sit dive, back-front dive and tricks such as the waterwheel, spinning stop, the Flying Honey Pot and the Australian Splash. At Bradford in September 1906 Kerr attracted record crowds with many having to be turned away. At this time swimming was still a novelty and both Kerr and Kellerman made an impact with their sleeveless men's racing suits which they wore in competition and for publicity photographs. One of Kerr's performance suits had metallic spangles resembling fish scales and weighed 2.3 kg while another was embroidered with a kangaroo and 'Australia'.

While men's racing suits were permitted for women swimmers in competition they were still considered indecent in public. Both Kerr and Kellerman built their careers on their physical accomplishments, with a public image based on bodily display and sensationism with their daring and revealing swimming costumes. While both women were in London, Kerr challenged Annette Kellerman to a race as her racing times were faster. Kellerman declined. Kerr continued touring Britain until 1911. She returned to Australia in October 1911 and married Griffith Ellis Williams, a Welsh-born dispenser in Redfern, Sydney and then retired from professional swimming. The Williams family lived at Bondi and took a keen interest in the development of the beach. A park at North Bondi was named after the family. Beatrice Williams died in Coogee and was buried at Waverley cemetery. She was survived by her only son. An exhibition on Beatrice Kerr was curated by Judy Nelson at the State Library of New South Wales in 1990.