

Kirra is on the edge of a \$500 million development boom, and a local surfing legend is along for the ride. **Jeremy Pierce** reports

Mr Kirra on crest of development wave

IF there's anything that Peter Turner doesn't know about Kirra, it's probably not worth knowing.

It's the by-product of living and breathing Kirra for a lifetime.

A long-time surfer, a former councillor, now a surf shop owner and soon to be a developer, Mr Turner could almost be called Mr Kirra.

He has been part of the Gold Coast surfing scene since pretty much day dot.

He recalls with a bit of a chuckle a story from 1973 when he was working at a South Tweed surf shop which has long since closed.

A young bloke had walked into the shop trying to convince them to stock a new pair of board shorts.

The bloke's name was Gordon Merchant, a man who made a bob or two from a company called Billabong.

"He was basically a one-man operation back then. It was just him and his wife," said Mr Turner.

"He came in with three new pairs of boardies that he wanted us to stock.

"He had written on the label: 'Billabong, since 1973' and I said 'Mate, it is 1973' and he just looked at me and said 'Well, you've got to start somewhere'."

It was a valid point. Mr Turner heeded his advice and four years later started local icon Kirra Surf.

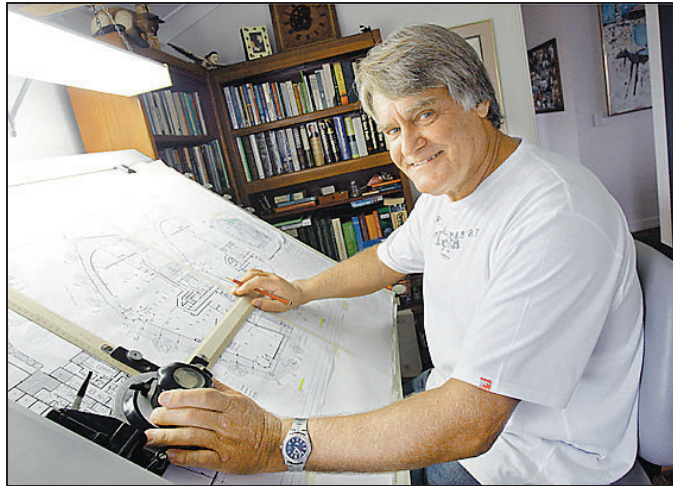
The business was immediately a success, as Australia's love affair with surfing and surfing merchandise took off.

It wasn't long before it had to move to a bigger base, its current home at the northern end of Kirra.

That building itself has its own colourful history, as the former home of the Gilltrap's Auto Museum.

It won't be staying there for much longer however - the site is earmarked for a unit tower, which is hoped to be a catalyst in kick-starting a development rush at Kirra, which has been largely overlooked by developers until now.

"It's pretty amazing," said Mr Turner. "This is the exact same ocean that is out the front of Hedges Avenue, or Main Beach, or Surfers Paradise, but for years



Kirra identity Peter Turner

Picture: David Clark

and years and years it was so depressed, no developer wanted a bar of it."

He said the famous beach was to blame. "For ages the beaches were a mess.

"For about 10 years there was literally no beach, it was a beach town, yet there was no beach.

"In big surf the waves used to wash across the road and the people at Bilinga used to worry that their houses would get washed away."

Lack of sand is not a problem any more - the Tweed River Sand Bypass Project has made sure of that.

In fact, many would say the oversupply of sand has caused its own problems, effectively killing off Kirra Point as a surf break.

However, Mr Turner remains patient. "It's easy to fix Kirra. Just wait. In 12 or 18 months it will be just like it used to be."

He is not the only one hoping for the return of Kirra's famous surfing beach.

The seaside suburb is about to launch into a \$500 million development boom, with half a dozen tower projects expected to start within a year.

He has a healthy understanding of planning and development matters, courtesy of a six-year stint as a local councillor, first on the old Gold Coast Council and then on the first amalgamated Gold Coast City Council.

He was ousted in 1997 by the late Sue Robbins, but says he

holds no grudge. "I always got on very well with Sue," he said.

"She was a good councillor and the area lost a good representative when she died."

Now 58, he has been married to wife Rhonda for 23 years and has two sons and two stepsons.

Not surprisingly, it was the beach that drew them together.

"I met Rhonda when I was 17 and she was 16," he said.

"She was a keen surfer who had come up from Newcastle and we got on well, but we both married other people so it was years later before we got together."

But back to the development.

The new project, which already has council approval, will be a partnership with Macquarie Bank. "We're surf shop proprietors, not developers," he said.

"The building is very, very tired though so something had to be done about it and with this development, they (Macquarie) get to build a high rise and we get a new surf shop, so it's win-win."

The new tower, to be called Kirra Surf - could it really be called anything else? - will stand at 13 storeys, overlooking the famous beach.

Construction should start by around the middle of the year, meaning the demolition of a local landmark.

However, it won't be a sad end for the famed surf shop - it will be reborn, bigger and better, on the ground level shopping plaza of the new project.

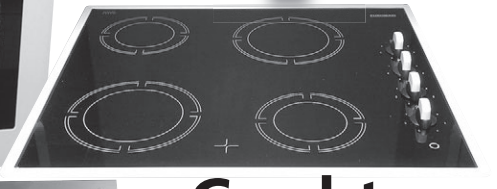
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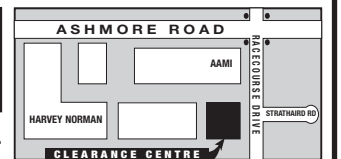
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