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by

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VIEWS OF BELMONT
PAST AND PRESENT

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN MILLISS

PRESENTED - 15th September, 1989.

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

198

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Signed John C Milliss

Date 28th August, 1989

Interviewer Suzanne Campbell

When looking at the history of the Belmont area it is portrayed as a quiet little town that has slowly grown over the hundred and twenty eight years that it has been settled by Europeans. There are several factors that have contributed to this development. Belmont is now one of the major centres in La One of these factors is community spirit which has faded in recent times. One other factor is industry, in which Belmont is quite diverse. This too has dwindled and been replaced by commerce and residential areas. Because of their decline, both of these factors are therefore worth closer study.

One part of history in Belmont that will always exist is the study of the lives, views and thoughts of some of the people, many of whom have lived in the area throughout along the development that took place in the twentieth century.

Threlkeld to Lake Macquarie to establish a mission in 1825, with a grant of ten thousand acres, and name it "Bantabab". There are conflicting reports of the date when the mission was abandoned through lack of funds. Some suggest 1829 and others 1831. Threlkeld, his family and his servants, who were mostly convicts, were the only known white residents of the area until 1861 when the New South Wales Land Act² allowed the first selectors to take up parcels of land.

Maurice Marks is commonly known as the first Belmont selector and was soon followed by Matthew Cobbin. The next selector, Thomas Williamson, played probably the most significant part in the establishment and growth of white settlement in Belmont.

Thomas Williamson, an immigrant from the Shetland Isles,

1. Lake Macquarie Shire Council, Lake Macquarie past and Present, Lake Macquarie, 1975, p 16.
2. A.C.Gray, Early Settlement of Belmont N.S.W. 1861-1891, Sydney, 1985.

VIEWS OF BELMONT
PAST AND PRESENT

The township of Belmont is now one of the major centres in Lake Macquarie. It has a diverse population and has geographically spilt over into other towns. But this is quite different to the earlier years in Belmont's evolution. It is of interest to look at the people and places that made up the town and the views of one of the long term residents, John Milliss.

The history of the town that was later to be known as Belmont goes back well into Aboriginal times when "Old Jacky's tribe",¹ the Awabakal, camped around Belmont Lagoon and along the shores of the lake. This brought Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld to Lake Macquarie to establish a mission in 1825, with a grant of ten thousand acres, and name it "Bahtahbah". There are conflicting reports of the date when the mission was abandoned through lack of funds. Some suggest 1829 and others 1831. Threlkeld, his family and his servants, who were mostly convicts, were the only known white residents of the area until 1861 when the New South Wales Land Act² allowed the first selectors to take up parcels of land.

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came to Belmont in 1865 from a business in Newcastle. He selected one hundred acres which included the site of "Bahtahbah", overlooking the lake. Williamson and his business partner, Robert Kirkaldy, built a guest house and named it "Belmont", hence the name of the township. Through his interest in the development of the town, he established a school on his premises in 1873, and the Post Office, of which he was Postmaster, in 1877. Church services were held in his paddock and his guest house was granted a liquor licence in 1876. He built a wharf for the convenience of his guests as well as playing a role in the establishment of suitable land transport routes to the area. The township was often known as Williamson's, so great was his involvement. At the time of his death in 1880, Thomas Williamson had left a significant mark on Belmont history.

John Anderson was another Shetlander who was a prominent selector in Belmont. He came to the area in 1870, established a dairy and orchard and in 1877 began a regular coach service between Belmont and Newcastle. Anderson's love of trees brought about one of Belmont's landmarks, the Norfolk Pines on Anderson's Hill. He also planted trees at Cane's Point, a popular tourist destination in later years.

The next selector worth mention is G. A. Lloyd, son-in-law of Reverend Threlkeld. He selected land on Cardiff Point and was one of the first to establish coalmining in the area.

Different industries brought many other people to Belmont. Over the years tourism, timber, shipbuilding, fishing and mining industries prospered.

The next major change in Belmont occurred in the 1920s.

This was when John Milliss, as a child, and his family came to live in Belmont. The Pacific Highway was extended south to Belmont in this time and the railway introduced in 1916. Electricity and water supplies were initiated and many community and sporting organisations and facilities began. Belmont population flourished during this time possibly because of the influx of employees of the new John Darling Colliery. Between 1921 and 1933 the number of homes and the population both quadrupled.³

In the years prior to World War II John Milliss remembers working as a boy to help out during the depression delivering newspapers and, later, groceries. As a child his favourite pastimes, like most Belmont boys, were swimming, fishing, shooting and camping.

Two of the main industries at this time were mining and tourism. These two industries have held an important place in the area over a long period of time.

Coalmining began in Belmont on an industrial scale in 1870 when three different companies commenced operations near Cardiff Point. Other mines operated in this area and further East. Most of these mines were small and known as twelve-light pits because of the maximum number of men allowed to work underground at any given time. Because of these limitations, these pits could only mine the shallow seams which contained a poorer quality coal. The resulting market limitations this imposed caused most of these mines to only operate for a short time. However, in the 1920s, a larger mine, often known as the Golden Egg, opened. Through various interruptions, and changes of ownership and name, this mine eventually closed as Belmont Colliery in 1980.⁴ By far the most significant mine to operate in Belmont was

3. Lake Macquarie....., Lake Macquarie Past....., p 18.

4. Jim Comerford, in W.S.Parkes, Belmont Lake Macquarie 1825-1974, Cardiff, 1974, p 87.

John Darling Colliery. This was the first colliery to be built by the Broken Hill Proprietary Company, or B.H.P., and was to provide coal for the operation of the Newcastle Steelworks. Named after B.H.P.'s Chairman of Directors 1907 to 1914, John Darling, work began in 1925 and the first manager was John Fallins. John Darling Colliery was a show-piece and also the testing ground for many developments in technology and mining practice. John Darling was the first Northern Region mine to use the now commonplace longwall mining method in 1982. The shaft freezing technology used in the sinking of the No. 4 Shaft was a first in Australia. Contract mining was practised in the early days and hand mining continued until 1938, when mechanisation was gradually introduced. The handling of employees through mechanisation resulted in industrial action and brought about the John Darling Award, which is used in all Australian mines today.⁵ Since the first coal was mined on November 14, 1927 until closure in 1987, John Darling employed a total of three thousand and four hundred employees and produced twenty six million tonnes of coal. Some believe the mine is responsible for the growth of Belmont from the fishing village it was in the 1900s.⁶

Tourism was another major Belmont industry. The town got the name from a tourism related source, namely Thomas Williamson's guest house. Henry Marks, brother of Maurice, began a short lived coach service in 1869. This venture ended a year later because of the poor condition of the road. Travellers were further encouraged in 1876 by the introduction of a steamer excursion on the lake by Thomas Williamson, John Anderson, and Thomas Russell, the Cooranbong storekeeper. In the early twentieth century, holiday makers mostly came from inner Newcastle, the Coalfields and the Hunter Valley.

5. Ibid, p 92.

6. B.H.P. Macquarie Collieries, John Darling Colliery 1925-1987, Newcastle, 1987, p 2.

Belmont was an ideal place for families, with safe swimming for the children, fishing and hunting for the men and shady trees by the water for the women to sit under. The opening of the railway, the building of the Pacific Highway and the introduction of a Government bus service in 1937 further promoted Belmont as a holiday destination or a nice place for a afternoon drive.⁷

Community spirit has played a large part in the area's development. Until recent years many Belmont people were related or closely tied. It was community effort that established and promoted developments such as building of schools, road improvements and, through the Belmont Advisory Committee, safety measures.

In recent times, Belmont industry has almost disappeared, Many long time residents have seen it grow from a quiet little village into a major Lake Macquarie suburb, and also seen opportunities for a revival in the tourist industry lost. Apathy has replaced enthusiasm as residents do not possess the same attitudes as the earlier settlers. However, the insight of some of these early residents may be of help to all concerned with the future of this suburb and of Lake Macquarie in its entirety.

7. Lake Macquarie Shire Council, Beautiful Lake Macquarie Near Newcastle N.S.W., Lake Macquarie, 1947.

S U M M A R Y O F I N T E R V I E W

This interview with John Milliss took place on August 28, 1989 in his home in Robb Street, Belmont.

Mr Milliss first tells us his name and the date and place of his birth and about the movements of his family until they first came to Belmont. Next there is some background on his father and on his brothers and sisters. He describes his childhood and his first job, as a young boy, on a paper run. He worked for a man named Bob Jackson, who owned the paper shop and also started the Voluntary Fire Brigade.

The interviewee describes to us the pastimes of himself and the other children and also tells us that his family moved from Belmont South to a place near "Bryant's", a coalmine, which was north of the end of Hill Street. He tells us of how he went shooting in the bush near his home. He and his friends also went camping, often down to the southern end of the lake. He sees himself as an average student in his schooldays.

The need to help support his family during the depression caused Mr Milliss to leave school early and take on odd jobs around town until he was sixteen years old, when he began working at B.H.P.'s Lambton B Colliery at Redhead.

After serving in World War II, Mr Milliss was in bad health. During this time he began to take an interest in the Belmont area. At this time, because of his mother's ill health, he moved into his present home in Belmont. He then tells us about the township and of the transport situation.

We discussed his work on the Belmont Advisory Committee and the problems it had obtaining improvements to the area. He sees one of his main achievements in this aspect of his life as the fight to get an open stormwater drain covered in the area which took ten years of petitioning to be approved. Some newspaper cuttings on this subject are then

shown, as well as one of a vacant block of Council owned land that has been neglected and is full of rubbish. Mr Milliss tells us how community effort and spirit has changed over the years and also how significant sewerage connection was to the growth of the Belmont area.

His opinion on Belmont which he states is disappointment with the lack of facilities for what could be a large tourist market. He also describes some of the problems endured by residents living near two major licensed clubs in the area and how, in this case, community effort was evident in the decision to close one of these clubs.

Mr Milliss then shows several photos and a postcard book. The postcards are prints of Newcastle scenes. The photos are from the first decades of the twentieth century and are of Belmont Jetty, Anderson's Hill and Swan Bay. He lastly restates the negligence of the tourist potential of the area, in this case Belmont South in particular.

JM: Oh, it was just, T R A N S C R I P T old town. I started school here. I got to the primary school, it's finished now,

ABBREVIATIONS: SC - Suzanne Campbell, JM - John Milliss

old grandads now, and, uh, two of them living down there

SC: This is Suzanne Campbell talking to John Milliss in his home in Belmont on the 28th of August 1989. Mr Milliss has lived in Belmont for the past sixty two years and has had many experiences through his employment and participation in the Belmont community.

SC: What is your full name?

JM: John Clifford Milliss.

SC: And when were you born?

JM: 18th of this February 1923.

SC: Where were you born?

JM: Willoughby, Sydney.

SC: Willoughby. When did your family first come to Belmont?

JM: Ah, I was only three year old.

SC: Right. And what did they come to Belmont for?

JM: The depression was on but before the depression Dad with just all the we just moved up to here and, uh, we lived a

SC: couple of weeks in Mayfield and we moved down to South Bel-

JM: mont, come out and moved down to South Belmont.

SC: Tell me a little bit about what your family did when they came to Belmont, your, a little bit about your parents.

JM: Dad was a, was a commercial traveller and my brother was a young, uh two to three years older than me. Elder sister

SC: and a young sister and we all started school, went to school

JM: here at the primary school.

SC: And what did your, what did your parents, your parents do in Belmont?

JM: Dad never had a job and he was, through the depression dogs years. He ended up working for the Housing Commission, and, uh, office work in the Housing Commission.

SC: Well, would you like to tell me a little bit about your

JM: childhood in Belmont? What was the, what was Belmont like?

- JM: Oh, it was just, it was just a little old town. I started school here. I got to the primary school, it's finished now, and, uh, we had lots of fun a few of the old boys, they're old granddads now, and, uh, two of them living down there near me now. I started work as a little boy with the paper run at Belmont and myself, two other, three other boys, with used to have to go down to the old railway station, pull the papers up in an old trolley, and, uh, bring the papers up to old Bob Jackson's shop near the Fire Brigade.
- SC: And where was that in Belmont? Particularly taken towards Near where, know where the Fire Brigade is? Right alongside there. He was the man who started the Fire Brigade. Bob Jackson.
- SC: Bob Jackson.
- JM: Bob Jackson. Voluntary Fire Brigade.
- SC: Right. What about, what did you do in your leisure time as a child? What were your pastimes?
- JM: We used to fish and swim and, ah, we ended up moving right up the top of the hill up in Bryant's old place, one of the foundation, sort of, founders of Belmont.
- SC: Where was that?
- JM: At the very top of the hill. Right up in those hills right up there.
- SC: Right. Belmont North, Jewells? Up near Jewells?
- JM: No, no, way from there. Right up Hill Street. Right up near the pit, right up there.
- SC: Oh yes.
- JM: We lived up there. Four of us went to school from there.
- SC: Walked from there to the primary school and, uh, with our leisure time we used to, I used to go shooting rabbits or anything with old Paul Turnbull. He'd bring his beagle dogs up and uh, little dog and I was only a little boy, and he'd take me shooting and, uh, looking for hares, hares or rabbits.
- SC: Yes
- JM: We used to go camping as boys do and wag school now and then

and at times we went down the bottom end of the lake camping.

SC: Jimmy Timmins, Jacky Timmins, Tommy Pitman, Tommy lives

JM: two houses away and we all had a good time. No money but we all had a good time.

SC: Yes. What about school? What did you find at school? Was there

SC: any particular emphasis on any type of subjects or....

JM: No. I was just an ordinary student, pupil. I had to leave

JM: school early to get a job to help put the money into the family. Australia and we went, uh, shunting they used to call

SC: Yes. Were you, were you sort of particularly taken towards

SC: any particular type of work? ... did you have during the war

JM: No, I never had a trade. ... particularly talk about.

SC: No. Well what was, what was your first job. that's all.

JM: Ah, the paper run of course. ... sort of leisure time did you

SC: Oh the paper run, yes. ... do with your leisure.

JM: Yes. ... pretty sick during, after the war and I had to look

SC: And what about your first full time job? ... a lot and, uh,

JM: Till I reached sixteen I used to do little odds and ends like around town. In the old cake shop and the cleaning the dishes, things like that. Linstrom's first started here in Belmont, I used to go down on a Friday, chap called Sam Ingram, Sam Greenwood, ride down to Catherine Hill Bay bought delivering the orders on a Friday.

SC: What was Linstrom's ... you buy this house down here. What, you

JM: They were the Linstrom's chain stores.

SC: Chain stores, right. And then what did you go on to after

SC: that. And what was the house, what was the area like as far

JM: When I was sixteen I got a job over at Lambton B Colliery.

SC: Right. And what did you do over there in Belmont.

JM: Well underground.

SC: Yes. ... just a, just a little old, a little old place. The

JM: Until after the war. Enlisted during the war. Came back after the war and I was suffered from epilepsy and I couldn't go down the mine on account of the bad turns. The manganer Mr Peter Brownlee found a job for me on the top and looked

after me very well and I was there till I retired.

SC: And what was work like underground in the mine

JM: Well just like all boys underground, you wanted to get on the top and go dancing or do something like that as a young boy.

SC: What exactly did you, did the young boys do underground in the mine at that time

JM: Well of course it was all mechanised, the first mechanised mine in Australia and we went, uh, shunting they used to call it with the locos.

SC: Right, uh, and what experiences did you have during the war Anything you'd like to particularly talk about.

JM: No nothing. Just went away during the war, that's all.

SC: When you became an adult what sort of leisure time did you have then. What did you do with your leisure.

JM: I was pretty sick during, after the war and I had to look after myself. Was in Concord hospital quite a lot and, uh, started to get better and had me on tablets and things like that and after that I just took interest in doing things around the, oh, the, oh the houses and things like that. We sold our old house up there. Got rid of it. Mum had a stroke and we couldn't live up there any longer and I bought this house down here.

SC: Oh, right. When did you buy this house down here. What, you know, what year would that be.

JM: About 1950, something like that

SC: 1950. And what was the house, what was the area like as far as housing goes then? Was it very highly developed or...

JM: No, no. There's plenty of houses around in Belmont.

SC: Yes.

JM: It was just a, just a little old, a little old place. The Co-op store here, the West Wallsend store and, uh, just an ordinary shopping centre. Melvic Theatre, the original one was up there where the Commonwealth Bank is at the present time and, uh, nothing other than that there was nothing in

Belmont.

SC: Alright.

JM: They still had the train going. They used the passenger train used to leave the station here at twenty to eight in the morning, take the girls into school, er, not to school, to work, and anybody who had to start at nine o'clock in Newcastle he was on the train.

SC: What was the trip to or from Newcastle like when, in the early days when you were here, by road or by train.

JM: Well we usually used to go on the Government buses, had started and we used to go in on the Government buses because the railway was so far from here. It's right down there near the, uh, nearly on the lagoon. It's a long way away if you've got to walk there.

SC: Yes, that's right. Alright then, what associations were you, were you or are you involved in in Belmont. Are you involved in any particular community association.

JM: I'm in the Advisory Committee. It's like an urban area and well I just like Belmont and I, er, I like to see some nice I always used to go crook about to the council about things that should be done and get done and I - just ignored - for the improvement of the town.

SC: Right. Can you tell me some of the work you've done on this Advisory Committee or some of the.....

JM: Oh, not me.....

SC: Well.....

JM: This big drain down there, that, and got covered. It took ten years to get that covered. The council wouldn't have anything to do with it.

SC: That's the drain down Marks Street...

JM: Marks Street.

SC: Down to the waterfront.

JM: Waterfront. It used to be very deep and it's wide. Pulled a little baby out of there one night, winter's night. Heard

SC: it crying, pulled it out, oh, might have been six o'clock
JM: at night when it was dark. Caravan park at the back here
belonged to the council and it was a disgrace to the town.
They never used to do anything about it. They wouldn't do
SC: anything about it and they wouldn't cover the drain or any-
thing up. The little kids used to come over when there's
JM: water in it and play in the big drain with broken bottles
and everything like that and made me mad and I thought I'd
go about that.

SC: Yes, why not, and it's all been done now.

JM: Took ten years to get it and I got no, no support from the
public, very little.

SC: No.

JM: (Shows newspaper cutting) That's on the same block just
down there.

SC: What's, what's this picture.

JM: That gives you the date down the bottom there.

SC: This is a council owned block?

JM: Hmm, still owned by the council.

SC: Yes, where is that?

JM: Just down the road here.

SC: Near the caravan park

JM: No just the end of this street here. The council are not
allowed to sell it on account of the caravan park. The
Lunn family, an old family of the Belmont gave it to the
council provided they do not, all this ground - I'll show
SC: you when we go out, this big, big lot of ground here - as
JM: long as they don't, they're not allowed to sell it. That's
SC: the reason they couldn't do that but the campers used to
throw bottles and everything over the, ah, it was a disgrace.

SC: Right.

JM: (Shows another newspaper cutting) That there's that, there's
that big drain there that was finally covered.

SC: That's the drain there.

JM: That's all the things there, see in there.

SC: And that's what 1986, it's....

JM: The dressing sheds, they ended up making new dressing sheds there. They were a disgrace to the town. There were never any, well tourists just wouldn't come and stay here.

SC: Right. Can you tell me anything else that the Advisory Committee has done on Belmont, some other projects.

JM: Oh, they're always asking for roads and things like that, improvements to the town, that's all they're doing. That's the idea of it, they just keep the, um, well looking after the town but a lot of time they just put the jobs into the council and the first thing the council, put it on the list, never ever done.

SC: What part did community spirit play in the building up of Belmont since you've been here. Has community spirit brought it along or has it just mostly sort of come along.

JM: Oh they didn't, after it's done they'll tell you like there's the big drain, it's a wonderful job. It should've been done but you wouldn't get any one bit of support from the public.

SC: Did you find there was more support with the community years ago like when you first came to Belmont or more than there is now.

JM: I think there was. Everybody had something, stuck together sort of thing and the women and the mothers used to borrow things and always used to return them and do a bit of cooking they'd swap things over the fences and things like that but none of that now.

SC: No.

JM: None of that at all.

SC: What do you think have been the most significant changes in Belmont.

JM: Well the sewer is the biggest thing in Belmont. When they started that before the war and they brought the sewer into the town it was just a little old town, no sewerage and once they brought the sewer in it was, all well, boomed it was as big a town as any town.

SC: Do you think that's what made it take off so much as a residential area

JM: Before the war, yes, the sewerage started possibly about 1936,37 and, uh, it was, it was just a boom to the town, It wanted it and it just had to be.

SC: And what brought that about Did the community bring it in or..

JM: No. I think just think the council and the water board it just had to come, it was just it.

SC: What do you think makes Belmont any different from any other lakeside town

JM: Belmont's got nothing at all here for the tourists, not a thing here to attract the tourists. If somebody would have a bit of a go you would say you could make a nice town. I've just spent a week down in Griffiths and it's just a beautiful spot. They've got everything there for the tourist. As soon as you arrive there you go here and you go there. They've got tours everyday going out to the orange orchards and things like that but you haven't got a thing here in Belmont. There's no bus service like running around the lake and things like that, not a thing.

SC: And what about the people, Belmont people. Do you think

SC: there's anything special about Belmont people now.

JM: All the old timers they're all good. Of course you don't know the new ones you don't know them. You only know the old ones you knew when you were young.

SC: Do you feel that all the older people seem to have stuck together

JM: Yes, hmm.

SC: Do you see anything for the future of Belmont

JM: It could boom being right on the Pacific Highway, it could

JM: really go, but as I say, the council's got no go on it,

SC: business people don't seem to care. They just don't. A lot

JM: of the shops have shut and there's no trade and the, you

SC: could make it a real good place but it's just no go at all.

JM: They don't care. Summertime comes and there's not a thing

SC: here to attract tourists to come here, not a decent... Well
JM: the park just over the back here, old Sid Toon Park named
after old Sid Toon the ambulance man - first permanent man
in the town, and they haven't even got a table or chairs or
anything like that for the bus to pull up for people to eat
their meals, nothing at all.

SC: Alright then, well, thanks very much for talking to me
Mr Milliss.

JM: The toilets and things like that are a disgrace. The lighting
very bad in the nighttime. They have a lot of trouble here
with the discos. The nightclub just here used to be the old
R.S.L. The 16's (16ft Sailing Club) are just down here and
when the 16s closed they used to come through here, walk
along there up to the nightclub and, uh, the damage they
done and the language, it was really, really terrible. You've
no idea, and it went on for a few years and the town just
got up on their feet and just got petitions and had to
close it down, had to stop. 16s weren't allowed to have
anymore discos.

SC: Was Belmont like that years ago

JM: No.

SC: When do you think this sort of behaviour or this sort of
thing started. Do you think there was anything happening in
Belmont that has made so many people come into the place
and change the character of Belmont as you said.

JM: They just don't live in the town. They, when the discos start
they come from wherever they, out of town and as long as
theres drink and there's, you know, everybody's making a
noise and everything like that, that's all it was.

SC: Alright then.

JM: (Shows photos) There's a , photos here.

SC: That's more, like a postcard isn't it of Newcastle.

JM: Some of the old... falling apart.

SC: How old would these photos be

JM: Oh lets see, possibly late 20s.

SC: Late 20s, and they're.

JM: They're all on this but they're just falling apart. Printed by old Bob Jackson whose was the man who had the paper shop.

SC: Right.

JM: And he had the, that was the early 30s late 20s and he printed this and you could buy them in the shop. You can see some of the sights, some of the things.

SC: These are Belmont Baths, Anderson's Hill, Swan Bay.

JM: Well there was no baths in the town at one time, just, just This one that shows you where we were swimming just off the jetty, no baths at all.

SC: Right, and what was the lake like then.

JM: Clean and nice and beautiful. Nowhere near the pollution that you've got now.

and Marks Point, Swan Bay and Marks Point was that....

Yes

JM: You can see photo here of the old ladies there with the old dresses, that's how ancient that is.

SC: Yes, yes.

JM: You can see the swimming tights here with the, the, um....

SC: Yes. Would this be, uh, Belmont South, uh, here

JM: Yes, that's the park over there. Another one there with Anderson's Hill. You can see there's no houses on, there's very few, uh, there's only ever about, only ever about four houses on the photo on Anderson's Hill.

SC: Yes, four.

JM: There all modern now and big.

SC: Did you find that Belmont South was more or less a quiet tourist place

JM: It could've been made a beautiful spot, right on the beach. It only takes you two minutes by car to get out to the beach and, uh, could've made lovely.

SC: Yes.

JM: Nothing ever, ever done.

SC: Alright then. Well thanks very much for that.

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