

# Blackheath Rocket Blasts Off

**IN** the early 1960s, past president of the Rotary Club of Blackheath, NSW, and former Blue Mountains City Council engineer John Yeaman visited the United States. Inspired by the Space Race imagery prevalent during the period, he returned with the idea of building a playground “rocket”.

With funding provided by the club, the first rocket was constructed by the Blue Mountains City Council in their blacksmith shop and installed by the local Council in the Blackheath Soldiers Memorial Park.

Dick West, also a Blackheath Rotarian and local metal fabricator, then used the plans to build another 36 playground rockets, which were distributed across Australia. The Rotary Club of Blackheath continued to sponsor new playground equipment throughout the 60s and 70s, which was routinely paraded in the annual Blackheath Rhododendron Festival.

Sadly, the original rocket was removed in 1997, from what had come to be popularly known as “Rocket Park” within the community, due to changed safety standards.

In the 2016-17 Rotary year, then president Andrew Hancock (the late John Yeaman’s grandson) and the club’s board decided its major fundraising project would be to reinstate the iconic Blackheath Rocket – a project that would “excite” the community as well as leave something lasting for generations to come.

A major fundraising campaign was launched, with custom designed rocket-printed caps and t-shirts sold for children and adults, badges and even rocket-shaped biscuits sold throughout



**“The best way to  
make children good is  
to make them happy.”**

**— Oscar Wilde,  
author and poet**



the community. A miniature rocket-shaped moneybox was also positioned throughout the town to attract additional donations.

"The Blackheath Rocket is both part of our heritage and part of our future," said well-known astronomer Professor Fred Watson AM, who formed part of the public campaign for support.

"The original rocket slide at Blackheath was the first in Australia and spawned copies that became an iconic feature of playgrounds throughout the country. And who knows how many seven-year-olds climbing into the future rocket's control cabin might be inspired into an illustrious career in science?"

"The Blackheath Rocket Project ticks all the boxes for both the local district and the wider community, and deserves wholehearted support. I wish I'd had a rocket to play on when I was a kid!"

RKR Engineering manufactured the new rocket, updating the original designs in line with contemporary safety standards.

In November, the club entered the rocket into the Blackheath Rhododendron Parade, reinstating the longstanding tradition put on hold for the past four decades.

As with the first rocket, the council partnered with the Rotary club to install the new rocket and adjoining slippery dip in the park.

Locals joined in watching the live stream of the rocket installation on the Blue Mountains Gazette's webpage – which garnered over 5000 views.

The official launch of the rocket took place in March, with a crowd of 300 enjoying a picnic and space-themed costume competition for the kids.

Adults reminisced on childhood hours spent playing in the rocket, and children "blasted off" for the very first time.

"Thank you Andrew, Rotary and all who have brought it back to our village," local Robin Starr said. "My brother and I had a lot of fun on the original and have so many great memories. The new rocket will give the youngsters of today, tomorrow and beyond wonderful experiences and memories too."

"We hope the rocket will help get kids excited about playing outdoors, space and using their imaginations – just like it did for generations before," Andrew said.

