Yarra Bend Park

History

Yarra Bend Park has been one of Melbourne’s largest expanses of inner suburban parkland for nearly 150 years. An interesting history is briefly outlined in this Park Note.

Establishment of Yarra Bend Park
Yarra Bend Park and neighbouring Studley Park were reserved in 1877. Both park areas and several reserves were combined in 1929 to create one large park. The combined area became known as Yarra Bend National Park despite never being raised to formal national park status. During the 1930’s additions included picnic and sporting grounds, toilet facilities and a public golf course. The Yarra Bend Golf Club House, officially opened in May 1936, is an original example of American ‘Country Club’ type architecture.

Dights Falls
A rocky bar across the Yarra River terminated surveyor Charles Grimes’ river expedition in 1803 and the first mob of cattle driven inland from NSW crossed the river here in 1836.

In 1841, John Dight built an artificial weir on the natural rock bar to provide water power to the Dight brothers’ Ceres flour mill, one of the first flour mills established in the Port Phillip District. Restoration work carried out in 1996 has opened up the mill to show the original engineering equipment used to power the mill.

Dights Falls is set in the foreground of a geologically significant cliff face. Four million year old sediments show faults and folds, layering and ripple beds of exposed ancient seabeds.

Institutions
Throughout the nineteenth century, several institutions were housed on the land of Yarra Bend Park. These included:

- The Merri Creek School (an aboriginal missions school established in 1848);
- The Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum (established in 1848 and decommissioned in 1925);
- The Queen’s Memorial Infectious Diseases Hospital (established in 1904), later the site of the Fairfield Hospital (closed in 1997), and finally re-built to house the Institute of Forensic Psychiatry (established in 1998);
- The Fairlea Women’s Prison (established in March 1956 and closed in August 1996).

The buildings and vegetable gardens of the most significant institution, the Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum, covered the majority of the Park. The Asylum had its own cemetery which recorded around 1,000 burials. Remnants of the Asylum include mature exotic trees such as Elms and Moreton Bay Fig trees, and a bluestone pillar which is located opposite the Park Office on Yarra Bend Road.

Studley Park Boathouse and Kane’s Bridge
The Burn family established “Riversdale” in 1863, the first of many boat houses on the Yarra River. Now known as the Studley Park Boathouse, it is significant for its continuity of use as a public boat house since its establishment. It is the oldest public boat house on the Yarra River and evolved into its present form by the 1930’s. The nearby picnic ground was one of two of Melbourne’s most popular nineteenth century picnic grounds. Kane’s Bridge, a suspension bridge, was first constructed over the Yarra River near the Studley Park Boathouse in 1927 and rebuilt in 1935 following the big flood of 1934.

Common Brushtail Possum

For more information call the Parks Victoria Information Centre on 13 1963 or visit our website at www.parkweb.vic.gov.au
Deep Rock

The Deep Rock Swimming Club was established in 1906, and the Deep Rock Swimming basin was a popular spot for competitions and recreational swimming until the 1940’s. The cliffs opposite were the site of a world record 62.7 metre high dive by Alick Wickham in 1918 which was sponsored by John Wren. The cliffs were later used as a backdrop for machine gun practice during the Second World War.

Urban Development

The Yarra Boulevard was constructed during the 1930’s depression and resulted in greater public use of the new park. The Eastern Freeway bisected the Park in the 1970’s, but attempts to lay the Brunswick – Richmond power line through the Park in the 1980’s failed in the face of strong community opposition.

Aboriginal History

In 1837 the government of NSW decided to set up a Protectorate to look after the interest of Aboriginal people in the Port Philip District.

The Yarra Protectorate was set up by William Thomas, the former principal of a London school, in 1839. Few details of the nature of the location of the Protectorate are known, except that Thomas built a hut near Olney Oval in 1845.

The Merri Creek Aboriginal School was set up in late 1845 on 27 acres of land at the junction of the Merri Creek and the Yarra River, half a kilometre away from Thomas’ hut. This region was a favourite camping spot for the combined Woiwurrung / Boonerwrung tribes and there was considerable interaction between the School, local Aboriginal people and Thomas’ hut.

Aboriginal History

Sited at the junction of the Merri Creek and the Yarra River, a garden was created by local Aboriginals to mark a traditional gathering place of Wurundjeri people. It features local native plants traditionally used by Aboriginals.

Galatea Point

The extensive stands of mature Eucalyptus with tussock grass understorey and busy bird life show the character of the riverside bush as it may have been at the time of European settlement. This remote and beautiful bushland area is being carefully restored by the Friends of the Yarra.

Corben Oval and the Yarra Bend Asylum Site

On the loop of the river stood the Yarra Bend Asylum, established in 1848 and housing over 1,000 inmates. The Asylum was closed in 1925 and little remains of the original buildings and structures.

Corben Oval, recognised as one of the most picturesque cricket grounds in Melbourne, was constructed on the site of the old Asylum vegetable gardens. The original bluestones are in place marking the borders of the gardens.

A bluestone pillar, part of the main entrance gate to the Asylum, still stands opposite the former Fairlea Women’s Prison site. A commemorative plaque gives a short history of the Asylum.

Trig Point

The highest point in the park, at the top of Wurundjeri Spur, offers splendid views of the city and surrounding hills. The track below leading down to the Pipe Bridge across the Yarra passes through Yellow Gum Woodland.