

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF YARRA BEND PARK

### **Aboriginal History**

The traditional landowners of Yarra Bend Park were the Wurundjeri Balluk, who were part of the Woiworung language group. Aboriginal Communities occupied Yarra Bend for thousands of years prior to white occupation. The topography, waterways and the junction of the Merri Creek and Yarra River are all elements which contributed to its significance for Aboriginals.

The Merri Creek flowed through the centre of the Woiworung tribal land, whose territory extended from Werribee River in the west, to Mount Baw Baw in the east, and as far north as the Great Dividing Range.

Very little first-hand knowledge of the Woiworung is available. The following summary of Woiworung social structures and subsistence activities is largely based on information about the Melbourne area.

The tribe was divided into four clans that were land-owning territorial units. The basic hunting and foraging unit within the clan was the band composed of one or more nuclear families. Bands would coalesce into bigger groups at certain times of the year, at places where resources were abundant. There were regular gatherings at the clan, inter-clan and inter-tribal level. The Woiworung had regular interchanges with the Bunurong, who were notably gregarious, and would try to meet often for purely social, as well as ceremonial and exchange purposes.

The plains to either side of the Merri Creek were hunted for emu, wallabies and kangaroos. Possums were taken from trees. The skins of wallabies and possums were used for making clothes, and the bones of wallabies for making bone tools. Streams and swamps supplied fish, eels, freshwater mussels and waterfowl. Timber and bark were exploited for making wooden artefacts and shelters. Many varieties of smaller plants formed a large part of the diet, and were used for medicinal and tool-making purposes. Stone tools were made for a variety of cutting, grinding and piercing purposes.



*Billibellary, a ngurungaeta or spokesperson of the Wurundjeri balluk  
(Latrobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)*

The Woiworung had many regular camping spots along the Merri Creek and Yarra River. Records from the early 1840's state that several hundred people were known to

be camping along the lower Merri Creek at one time. The specific location and nature of these camps are not known, nor is it clear whether they were traditional camping grounds or were the result of European settlement.

The Koori Garden located at the meeting of the river and creek, was created by local Aboriginal people in 1990 to commemorate this former gathering place. Signs were erected by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria in 1999 to interpret some of the significant Aboriginal sites within Yarra Bend Park.

### **European Settlement and Urban Development**

Charles Grimes, NSW Surveyor General, is believed to be the first European explorer in the Melbourne area. He led his survey party on a river expedition to the Yarra Falls (Dights Falls) area in 1803 to report on prospects for settlement.

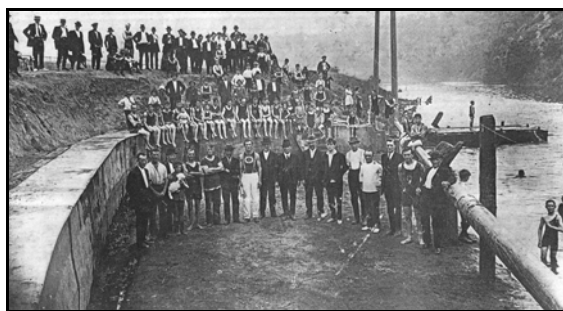
Following settlement of Port Phillip Bay in the 1830's, the park and surrounding land was sub-divided into large parishes and the first public land sales were held shortly after. With the exception of a large area of land along the Yarra River retained for the possible establishment of institutions, all the land had passed into private ownership by the late 1840's.

In 1838, George Augustus Robinson and William Thomas were appointed as Aboriginal Protectors in Melbourne. William Thomas set up a Protectorate Station on a bluff overlooking the Yarra River in 1843 (Deep Rock Picnic Area), where he distributed rations and conducted school classes and religious services for Aboriginal people. The Merri Creek School, an Aboriginal mission school, was established in 1846 and later closed in February of 1851.

In 1841, John Dight built an artificial weir on the natural rock bar in the Yarra River, to provide water power to the Dight brother's CERES flour mill, one of the first flourmills established in the Port Phillip district. Restoration work carried out in 1996 by Parks Victoria and the City of Yarra, has opened up the mill to show the original engineering equipment used to power the mill.

In 1863, the Burn family established "Riversdale", the first of many boathouses on the Yarra River. Now known as "Studley Park Boathouse", it is significant as it is the oldest continually operating public boathouse in Victoria.

The Deep Rock Swimming Club was established in 1906, at the Deep Rock Swimming Basin, which was a popular spot for competitions and recreational swimming for many years. The cliffs opposite were the site of a world record 62.7 metre high dive by Alec Wickham in 1918, which was sponsored by the infamous John Wren. The Deep Rock Swimming Club dismembered in 1957.



*Deep Rock Swimming Club (1920)*

In 1909, Victoria's first government operated fish hatchery was established near the corner of Studley Park Road and Walmer Street, Kew. The hatchery operated until 1952 and, upon its closure, 28 of the surrounding Elms were removed and replaced with Cypress Trees.

In 1929, Kane's Bridge was built to link Studley Park and Yarra Bend Park. The Bridge was named after Councillor T J Kane of Collingwood, who was a member of the Yarra Bend Management Committee. The Bridge was washed away by the disastrous floods of 1934, and was rebuilt in 1935 by Unemployed Relief Scheme Workers.

In 1936, the Yarra Boulevard between Johnston Street Bridge and the Chandler Highway was officially opened.

Unemployment Relief Scheme Workers also carried out construction of The Boulevard.

European settlers used parts of the Park for grazing. In some areas this practice was discontinued in 1940, and by the early 1960's was abolished throughout the Park.

The construction of the Eastern Freeway in 1972 altered the course of the Yarra River destroying the Deep Rock Basin. By far the most significant impact of urbanisation on the park, the Freeway's construction had a profound and irreversibly destructive effect on the natural areas of the park, in addition to significantly reducing the size of the park.

The Fly-Casting Pool was also relocated following the Freeway construction. The current pool was handed over to the Red Tag Fly Fishers Club and officially opened in 1978.

In 1994, the original turn-of-the-century Studley Park Bowling Club Pavilion was relocated from Kew to Yarra Bend Park, saving the building from demolition. The Building remains in the Park and serves as an informal meeting place for local artists.

## **Institutions**

The first of many institutions in the area, the Metropolitan Lunatic Asylum, opened in October of 1848.

The Asylum took up much of the northern area of the Park, with many buildings located near the Yarra Bend Road loop. It was later renamed the Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum in July of 1851.

By 1870, the Asylum housed 1043 patients making the institution one of the largest of its kind in the world.

The Asylum by this stage was largely self-sufficient, producing vegetables, pork, poultry, beef, eggs, butter and milk. It also had its own clothing, boot makers, carpentry and blacksmith shops. The last admission to the Asylum was accepted in 1924, and the Asylum closed in 1925.



*Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum*

In 1871, the Kew Asylum opened as an extension of Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum and became an independent Asylum by October of 1872. The Kew Asylum buildings now form the Willsmere Residential Estate.

In 1904, the Queen's Memorial Infectious Diseases Hospital was established along Yarra Bend Road, Fairfield. The Hospital closed in 1996 and part of the land now accommodates the Thomas Embling Hospital, opened by the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine in April 2000.

The Mission of St James and St John opened a Venereal Disease Clinic named "Fairhaven" in 1927 on land previously occupied by the Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum. The Clinic closed its doors in 1951 and the site was annexed to the Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital as staff quarters and storerooms.

In 1953, the former "Fairhaven" site was acquired by the Prisons Division for conversion into a female prison, renamed "Fairlea". Fairlea was officially opened in 1956 and closed in August 1996. The current Park Office, adjacent building and basketball court have been adapted for their current uses since being part of the former prison site.

## **Land reserved as parkland**

In 1877, the Studley Park area was reserved as parkland as it was considered too steep and stony for grazing. In 1925, much of the parkland of Yarra Bend Park opened up following the closure of the Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum. A Committee of Management was appointed to manage Yarra Bend Park in 1926, and in 1929 several reserves were combined to create one large park. The combined area became known as Yarra Bend National Park despite never being raised to formal national park status. The *Kew and Heidelberg Lands Act 1933* provided for the establishment of a Trust to manage the parklands.

### **Parkland Development and Protection**

During the 1930's additions included picnic and sporting grounds, toilet facilities and the Yarra Bend Public Golf Course. The first 9 holes were constructed in 1932 and the following 9 in 1934. The Golf Club House, officially opened in May 1936, is an original example of American "Country Club" type architecture. The success of the Golf Course prompted the need for an additional 9 holes to be added to the course. Plans were drawn up and the area cleared of rocks, however the advent of War prevented the implementation of the plan.

In 1959, a single storm destroyed more than 100 trees in the Park, and in 1962 extreme fires destroyed more trees than had been planted.

In 1964, the Par 3 – 9 hole golf course, located in Studley Park, Kew, was opened. A number of sporting pavilions were constructed in the Park in the mid 1970's. These were financed by the Country Roads Board who assisted in developing the park area disturbed by the construction of the Eastern Freeway.

In April 1997, the Yarra Bend Park Trust formed a partnership with Parks Victoria to ensure a strong focus on the long term protection and upkeep of the Park. A Management Services Agreement was officially signed and Parks Victoria assumed responsibility for the management, development and operation of the Park in April 1997.

Significant structural, environmental, planning and contractual initiatives were implemented following the commencement of the Management Services Agreement with Parks Victoria. An injection of more than \$1 million by Parks Victoria in the late 1990's enabled improvement works to roads, fencing, toilet facilities, pathways, golf courses and associated infrastructure. The program also included the introduction of new picnic facilities and children's playgrounds.

The overall future planning for Yarra Bend Park was detailed in a 5 year Strategy Plan released in April 1999. An Environmental Action Plan, to guide the conservation management of the Park, was completed in April 2000 and set priorities for future management programs. A Draft Heritage Conservation Plan 2001 was prepared to recognise and protect the significant cultural features of the Park. In 2001 a Draft Asset Management Plan and Parks Victoria Levels of Service Report were completed.