

Gardiners Creek Reserve

This information is based on a talk presented by Greenlink Life Member Peter Dwyer at the Annual Workshop conducted by the Blackburn and District Tree Preservation Society, 30th July 2002.

Introduction

Gardiners Creek Reserve runs diagonally between Station St, Box Hill South and the Burwood Highway, Burwood. The area is bound on the north and east and southwest by residential properties and, in other areas by Deakin University.

As an open space/waterway, it links to Wattle Park in the west. Upstream links run through the Box Hill Golf Club and, eventually, Blackburn Creeklands and Blackburn Lake. Downstream links run through various reserves in the cities of Monash, Boroondara and Stonnington before the Creek runs into the Yarra at Toorak.

To the east, the reserve links to Wurrundjeri Walk and, not too far away, Damper Creek Reserve on Middleborough Road.

Gardiners Creek is identified in Andrew Lemon's "History of Box Hill" under at least three other names: Kooyongkoot (Kulin for "haunt of the water fowl"), Main Creek and Damper Creek. The last of these names seems to have been applied to several creeks in the area.

History

In 1838, Arundel Wrighte took up his initial pastoral run at "Marionvale", sited approximately where Canterbury Gardens on Canterbury Road is located today. Wrighte assumed that his run covered the ground two or three miles east of Marionvale and was not backward in complaining to the authorities of the day concerning interlopers cutting in on his patch of earth.

In 1841 he complained to Governor Latrobe about timber-cutters on his land, including one Charles Mullins, who had taken up operations near present-day Stott St, Box Hill South.

This is the first reference that I can find concerning the demise of Box Hill South's indigenous flora.

Let's skip forwards a bit to 1853. Elgar's survey describes the land around the southern end of present-day Gardiners Creek as "black soil timbered with Box, Gum and Stringybark". Elgar's map shows that many settlers had taken up residence and that the landscape was already changing.

By 1882, logging was well underway in the Damper Creek valley and by the time of the depression of the 1890s, much of the area had been cleared, mainly for orchards. Families that were finding the going tough, had to venture further and further out to conduct their tree-felling, often the only source of income during these hard times.

From this information, one can get the general idea that the area around present-day Gardiners Creek Reserve was cleared very early in the piece.

The Artist Camp Connection

On 4 March 1885, Artist Tom Roberts departed England aboard the S.S. Lusitania, and arrived in Melbourne on 25 April. He commenced work with the photographers, Barrie & Brown, Bourke Street, Melbourne, and also produced black-and-white work for The Bulletin and other periodicals. He also produced drawings for The Picturesque Atlas of Australasia and The Australasian Sketcher.

He rented a studio with George Rossi Ashton and John Mather at 95 Collins Street, Melbourne, and painted plein air in the vicinity of Darebin Creek, Gardiners Creek, and along the Yarra River in Heidelberg, where his work 'Quiet Stream, Heidelberg', c. 1885 was painted.

During the summer of 1885/1886, Roberts camped with Frederick McCubbin and Louis Abrahams in the bush along Gardiner's Creek in Box Hill. Here he produced '[The Artists' Camp](#)', 1886, and '[A Summer Morning Tiff](#)', 1886, which he discussed and illustrated in a letter to his then girlfriend, Lillie Williamson. Other paintings by Roberts during the period include '[Winter Morning after Rain, The Old Bridge, Gardiner's Creek](#)', thought to be the bridge at what is now Burwood Highway.

On to the 20th Century

By the 1930's, Albers flower farm, supplying jonquils and daffodils, had been established at the southern end of the reserve near the Burwood Highway and fruit orchards were well established throughout the area.

An aerial photo taken of the northern half of the reserve on 23rd December 1945, shows that the land was mainly cleared with small areas of remnant adjacent to the present-day Morton St and also at the junction of Gardiners Creek and Damper Creek, which flows in from the south-eastern boundary of Wattle Park. Apparently this was the site of a sizeable billabong.

The 15-year period following the second world war saw a considerable amount of residential development in the area and the establishment of many schools, colleges and institutions including: The Princess Elizabeth Deaf School, Burwood High, Burwood Tech, Wattle Park High and Bennetswood Primary, to name a few.

Gardiners Creek in Box Hill South remained pretty much a no-man's land. There was a rubbish tip at the southern end near the Burwood Highway and other activities, such as the pony club near Glengarry Avenue, were established.

By the 1970s, the Reserve was earmarked as the site of the Healesville Freeway.

By the early 1980s, the State Government had abandoned plans for the Healesville Freeway. The former MMBW commenced flood mitigation work, re-lining and realigning the creek between Station Street and the Burwood Highway. The City of Box Hill convened a (now disbanded) Committee of Management to create Gardiners Creek Reserve. Despite a number of objections, the Reserve was created.

The creek was lined with rocks and a number of rock-weirs were installed. A billabong and lake were formed at the Station Street end. The junction with Damper Creek (from Wattle Park) was straightened. For its part, the City of Box Hill installed paths down both sides of the creek, joining, wherever possible, existing mature Eucalypts (more on that later!).

Vegetation

As stated, the Reserve was largely a 'blank canvas' in the early 1980s, apart from the tiny remnant adjacent to Morton Street, a few Swamp Melaleucas lining the creek and a small number of quite large remnant Eucalypts, mainly *E. viminalis*, along the northern boundary. According to the Draft Management Plan for the Reserve, prepared in 1993, most of the topsoil in the Reserve had been overlaid with landfill brought in from road construction projects.

The Reserve, especially along the creek, was plagued with weeds, including Gorse, Blackberries, Ash trees, Willows and lots of other 'nasties'. The City of Box Hill Parks and Gardens staff cleared vast amounts of these weeds. 'Native plants' were planted by a variety of groups.

The council organised planting days involving school groups, cubs, scouts, various institutions, etc and as one Council employee described it to me, as one group were boarding their bus following a planting session, another group was disembarking from the next bus.

Members of what was to become Greenlink were actively involved in early plantings which came from a variety of sources including some 'rescues' from a factory site in King St, Blackburn.

In earlier days, unfortunately, not all of the plants were indigenous. They included *Acacia decurrens*, *Melaleuca stypheloides* and *Casuarina cunninghamiana* (most have now been removed). Early planting schemes even supplemented the stock in the remnant with 'native' plants of doubtful origin.

As people became more aware of the need to plant indigenous, more care was taken to select plants that came from local stock.

In the early 1990s, following election of the Kennett Government and subsequent Council amalgamations, the amount of resources available for Council involvement in development of the reserve diminished. Council projects that were underway were abandoned 'overnight'.

In 1996, Shirley and I joined Greenlink and we have been involved with the Reserve since that time. A short while later, Sue Betheras joined us.

It is worthwhile to pause here and acknowledge that most of the groundwork in setting up the reserve, revegetating it and making it what it is today, was undertaken by employees of the former City of Box Hill and those hundreds of volunteers who planted all of those trees during the 80s and early 90s.

In particular, we would like to single out Peter Cockroft who has planted a significant area of the Reserve.

Since we took over, most of the plants have been sourced from local seed, including Wattle Park, Surrey Dive, Greenlink's stock, 'known' reliable plants within the reserve – and 'rescues' from the site of the present Deakin University residences. Unlike earlier planting efforts, our planting regime has always included all storeys at once, from grasses and herbs through to sedges, bushes and trees.

The Reserve as a Corridor

So, here's a reserve that is almost 100% artificial garden. It's got little of its original soil structure. Its most common plant is Kikuyu. It is, in the opinion of many, the busiest park in the City of Whitehorse. Unlike most parks in the City, Gardiners Creek reserve has little remnant indigenous vegetation and was created from scratch...

Why are we wasting our time on a gardening project?

1. Proof that it is a corridor

Local long-term resident and bird enthusiast, John Peter, has been keeping excellent records of bird sightings over the past thirteen years. During this period, John has documented sightings of at least 119 different species of birds. [See [Birds of Gardiners Creek](#).] This is in addition to records of bats, reptiles and amphibians.

2. Corridors are fast disappearing

The election of the Kennett Government in 1992 brought about a number of changes in the way that residential land is used. One of these was the introduction of Vic-code, which made it far easier for establishment of multiple-occupancy of building sites that had formerly contained a single dwelling. What's the most expendable part of a house-block when you want to add a mock Georgian home unit or two? The garden. It would be hard to estimate how much open space in gardens has been lost in the area since multiple-occupancy but one could image that it is significant.

Another action of the Kennett Government involved the closing down and redevelopment of a number of schools in the area, including (in the immediate vicinity) Burwood High, Wattle Park High, Bennetswood Primary, Burwood Primary and Burwood Tech (the last was closed before 1992). One walker in the reserve a few years back estimated that, at that time, 28 parcels of land of a size equal to or larger than a football field, had been lost in the previous 10 years. Of course, these schools contained, in many cases, areas of remnant vegetation in addition to open space.

Other institutions have sold and moved on. The Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind sold a major part of its land at the corner of Station St and the Burwood Highway. The Princess Elizabeth Deaf School sold its Elgar Road property to Deakin University in the late 1990s, adding to the University's acquisition of Allambie next door, giving the University a significantly large Elgar Road frontage. I will look at the effect of the Deaf School and RVIB sales later.

Some other significant open spaces that seem certain to disappear in the next few years include land owned by the Franciscan Monks at St Pascal's, near Sparks Reserve and the former St Leo's College, both of these sites upstream on Gardiners Creek.

As shown in the map displayed at the start of this talk, Gardiner's Creek Reserve is a vital link within the Eastern suburbs.

For further information, refer to the recent ARCUE study that found that the City of Whitehorse contains the 6th lowest amount of public open space per head of population.

The number of links in the chain is fast decreasing. Every bit is precious. That's why we are putting so much of our time into Gardiners Creek Reserve.

Threats

There are a number of threats to the viability of Gardiners Creek Reserve that need to be addressed if it is to remain an effective corridor.

I will outline each type of threat:

- Park Users
- Development
- Park Design
- Succession
- Confusion of responsibilities
- FUD

Park Users

As previously stated, the Reserve is thought to be the busiest reserve in the City of Whitehorse. One of the reasons for this popularity is the Reserve's 'off leash' status for dogs. According to the City's CEO, there are 19,000 dogs registered with the Council (in 2002), one for every 7.3 residents! Unfortunately, dogs don't understand that the garden beds were planted for a reason – to provide food and shelter. A good proportion of dog-owners are responsible, however dogs are allowed to roam through planted areas to cause considerable damage. Some areas have been replanted 3 or 4 times over to compensate for the damage. What's worse is when the owner follows the dog through the garden – as we often observe!

Despite the Council's widely-publicised 'conditions for off leash parks', some owners allow their dogs to chase the birds, in particular the water-birds in the lake, undoubtedly causing stress to the birds and negating the effect of the Reserve as a corridor.

A couple of years ago, in partnership with Birds Australia, we designed a poster that discourages park-users from feeding the ducks, pointing out the dangers. This poster is on display in the Park and is available, in electronic form, to anyone who wants it – gratis. The most common response when we discuss this matter with Park Users is 'but the kiddies love it'. Obviously this is an education issue right throughout the City – perhaps the Council could look at this problem as it is widespread – Heyington Wetlands, Blackburn Lake and Surrey Dive are some other areas where we've observed this practice.

Development

I touched on development before but I will outline two actual examples of development and how they have directly affected the Reserve as a corridor.

1. In the late 1990s Deakin University purchased the Princess Elizabeth Deaf School on Elgar Rd. This large site contained several hectares of weeds (watsonia, blackberries, gorse etc) but also Themeda, Davesia, Poa morissii, Danthonia, Veronica, Lomandra and other remnant plants. It was mown about once per year. During 1998, Deakin cleared the land and constructed student residences at the eastern end.

John Peter's comments: 'Many species of small birds have disappeared with the destruction of the swamp/blackberries/grassland. These include: White-browed Scrubwren (which survived for exactly 1 week after the bulldozers went in); Golden-headed Cisticola (which actually disappeared before the bulldozers went in; two grass-slashing episodes a few weeks apart finished them off); Superb Fairy-wren (again, disappeared earlier, after a bout of 'tidying up'). My only record of a Richard's Pipit was in the grassland a week before it was bulldozed.'

2. The Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind owned a huge site at the corner of Station Street and Burwood Highway. They sold off a large chunk of this site during the 90s and a retirement village and substantial office block were built on this land. ...

Of this, John Peter comments: 'The trees at the Blind Institute were chopped down, and the following day there were dozens of displaced Miners sitting on the ground along Gardiners Creek'... 'The number of White-plumed Honeyeaters has declined alarmingly over the past few years'... 'This decline is matched (though I haven't done the stats on it) with an increase in the numbers of Noisy Miners in the park'.

Park Design

The park is linear, ranging in width between about 50 metres and 300 metres. The planted areas are narrow, most between 5 and 10 metres in depth, forming narrow strips that provide limited protection for small birds and animals.

The path was laid in a similar manner to many other linear parks – joining the mature remnant Eucalypts. I remember attending a meeting concerning dangerous trees at Blackburn Creeklands a few years ago. This meeting was called because an arborist had declared many of the Creeklands' trees to be unsafe as they were nearing the end of their natural lives and this had been exacerbated by compaction. This situation is fast approaching at Gardiners Creek Reserve.

To address these threats, we have been developing wider garden beds including some in areas that are not frequented by park users, such as the boundary at the eastern end of the Deakin University Student Residences and undertaking plantings in fenced-off areas, such as the area that we refer to as 'the forest' in the centre of the Reserve. Unfortunately the Council has been removing fences, or failing to repair them when they are broken. The effect of this is that our 'segregated plots' are being used and plants are being trampled.

The Council has to take more responsibility for safeguarding this aspect of the Reserve.

We have experimented with borders and conclude that long large logs (50-60 cm in diameter) seem to be the best protection against all but the larger dogs.

We have also taken to developing planted areas outside, but bordering the reserve, for instance, at the junction of Gardiners and Damper Creeks, on land owned by Deakin University. We hope that the University will include provision for corridor planting, particularly along the path of Damper Creek, in future building projects – we aren't holding our breath!

Succession

There are just three regular volunteers that look after the Reserve. On the 'up' side, it means that we can organise/reschedule a working bee at very short notice, however the 'down' side is that there is no one to take over if we are unable to continue maintaining the Reserve.

The most important task at present is restoring the Remnant Patch. This patch is fast degrading, with weeds running out of control. Kids from neighbouring houses are using the Remnant as a play area, causing the loss of many plants and the over-story trees are starting to die out. We aren't sure how to deal with this one, given our limited resources, but the Remnant is in real danger of disappearing altogether.

Succession of plants is also of concern. Approximately 100 years elapsed between the clearing of Damper (Gardiners) Creek and the establishment of this Reserve. As previously stated, older trees are dying off and the new replacements are, at maximum 20 years old. Hollows and perching trees are at a premium.

John Peter said of one old tree, 'Although there are a few cormorants around at the moment, their numbers declined quickly after one of the Gums in which they always roosted fell over'. We have very few old trees left in the Reserve.

Perhaps wider usage of nesting boxes will need to be investigated but also the routing of paths beneath existing large Eucalypts should be re-examined – not just at Gardiners Creek but perhaps other reserves in the Corridor.

Responsibilities

We are told that the creek itself, and a border of 10 metres (?) up the bank is the responsibility of Melbourne Water. Because of this, Council staff refuse to be involved in clearing of debris or weed control within a certain distance of the water. A Melbourne Water representative might drop by and do a bit of slashing along the creek bank once every six months or so in a good year – less often in a bad year. Several large infestations of Wandering Tradescantia have established themselves along the creek banks and these are working their way steadily into the reserve.

The Council has been unable to get Melbourne Water to address the weeds issue along the creek. Melbourne Water has insufficient funds to tackle the issue. I am aware that the creek is far worse further downstream at Glen Iris, where VicRoads has allowed the creek to regress to a weed patch, after having put considerable resources into revegetating the area. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any Friends' Group to tackle the worst weeds in this area.

FUD = Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt

Deakin University owns large parcels of land on both sides of the Reserve. To the east, most of the land has been developed, with a few areas earmarked for future development. The west consists of a number of old buildings from Allambie, the Princess Elizabeth Deaf school, the newly built student residences and a large parcel of vacant land, acquired from the Deaf School.

Deakin University has generated more publicity for Gardiners Creek Reserve than any other organisation. A very effective group of park users and local residents has formed with the intention of blocking some of the development of the Deakin University sites that they see as inappropriate. The group is media-aware and certainly has proven that it has the measure of both the Council and the State Government.

Accordingly, Deakin University, which has had some of its plans rejected by various authorities, including the State Planning Minister just before the last Federal Election, has started playing its cards close to its chest.

As stated, the University intends to start expanding on its land located on the western side of the Creek. Apart from developing buildings, there are questions being raised as to how staff and students will move between east and west. Will a bridge be built? Deakin says 'no' but common sense says 'yes'. What effect will this expansion have on the park? Deakin says minimal but common sense says otherwise. Will there be vehicular traffic between east and west? Deakin says no but we can't see how they can get by without it. The most obvious path for inter-site access is across the junction of Damper and Gardiners Creeks – which leaves us feeling most uneasy.

All of this has the potential for a disastrous effect on the future of Gardiners Creek Reserve as a Corridor. We already have an example of neither Council nor University being able to confront the problem head-on when the bridge linking Stott St to Glengarry Avenue came up for replacement. The obvious choice was to erect the replacement bridge at the entrance to the student residences, due to the significant change in foot-traffic in the area. Both parties, sensing some adverse reaction took the easier, and less sensible, option and merely replaced the existing bridge in situ. They even got the Mayor to unveil a memorial rock at the site of the 'new' bridge with appropriate pomp and ceremony. Vast numbers of students, unwilling to walk the extra 200 metres to the bridge, now risk personal safety by crossing the creek at the rocks nearby to the student residences. The bank at this point is badly eroded.

How do we get around all this senseless FUD? Deakin University needs to publish its future intentions. The resident group needs to look for compromise. The Council needs to be a little firmer in its dealings with complainants.

If not, the big losers will be the birds, animals, insects, reptiles, etc that can't speak for themselves but will suffer the greatest amount.

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'Box Hill' by Andrew Lemon (1978)

Peter Creak, Stephanie Finn, Sally-Ann Henderson – 'Draft Management Plan' compiled as part of assessment toward Park & Reserve Management, Deakin University, Rusden Campus (1993)

