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ROCKDALE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL



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ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

24 Duff Street,
ARNCLIFFE, 2205.
November 1974.

Dear Friend and Member,

The regular meeting will be held as follows:

Date: Friday Evening, November 15th, 1974, at 8 p. m.

Place: Council Chamber, Town Hall, Princes Highway, Rockdale.

Business: General.

Syllabus Item: Mr. Tony Cahill will give an Illustrated Address entitled:
"The Bulletin, and Early Australian Nationalism". This
address should be both interesting and entertaining.

Supper Roster: Captain: Mrs. Coghlan, and Mesdames Perkins, O'Shea,
Longhurst, Samuelson.

Ladies please bring a plate.

Mr. D. Sinclair.
President.
Phone 587.4555.

Mrs. E. Eardley.
Hon. Secretary.
Phone 59,8078.

Mrs. E. Wright.
Treasurer & Social Sec.
Phone 599.4884.

Mr. A. Ellis.
Research Officer.
Phone 587.1159.

"He who admits he knows nothing already knows something."

Greek Proverb.

News Items.

The President, Mr. Don Sinclair, takes pleasure in announcing that our December Meeting (20/12/74), a festive occasion, will be held in lovely old "Lydham Hall". Do come along, make it really Christmas, and let us all enjoy a very happy evening together.

Social News.

Many requests have been made for a trip to Cobbity, including a Service at the historic St. Pauls C. of E. To this end your Social Secretary, Mrs. Wright, has arranged for a bus, details as follows:

Date: Sunday, November 24th, 1974.
Meeting Place: Town Hall, Rockdale.
Time: 9 o'clock a.m. SHARP.
Cost: \$2.00 per person.

After lunch, at approximately 1.30 - 2 p.m. you will visit "Gledswood", a very old home, once the home of the Chisholm Family, which will be open for inspection.

Please come along, there are still a few seats available, and feel free to bring your Friends who may be interested. Mrs. Wright will appreciate your support. Ring 599.4884 for bookings, money at next meeting please. Thank you.

We take pleasure in announcing that Book number "7", published by the St. George Historical Society, entitled: "Early History. Tempe and the Black Creek Valley", written and illustrated by Gifford Eardley, is now available at a cost of \$1.00 - plus 24¢ postage.

Copies may be purchased from the Hon. Sec., phone 59.8078, or from Miss Otten, at "Lydham Hall", at weekends. Books number 5 & 6 are still available, reprints of books number 1-2-3 & 4 will be available at an early date.

It is pleasing to hear that Mr. Jack Woods has returned home after a period in Hospital.

VALE.

Since our last meeting the Society has suffered the sad loss of Mr. Fred Hayman, late of Hillpine Avenue, Kogarah. Mr. Hayman, who was ill for a long time, attended meetings when possible and took an active interest in the history of the St. George District. To his family, we offer our deepest sympathy.

To trace the historical development of a country-side it is mostly necessary to follow the course of the wandering waterway which flows through its base levels, for a copious and reliable supply of fresh-water was a paramount necessity linked with the everyday needs of the community settled along its banks. For the purpose of our essay it is thought fitting to describe the ecology as well as the advancement of settlement along the lower section, known locally as "THE VALLEY", of the once beautiful Wolli Creek, commencing from its embouchure with Cook's River south-west and adjacent to the Tempe Railway Station: then to follow the meanderings of this tributary stream until the former water-splash of the now long abandoned western extremity of Arncliffe Street is reached in the vicinity of the Turrella Railway Station. It may be mentioned at this juncture that the construction of the East Hills Railway during the mid-nineteen-twenties necessitated the re-routing, closure and also the renaming of some of the thoroughfares, formerly narrow bush roads, lined with post and rail fences, which once served the access needs of the local farm-folk.

It is verbally convenient to discuss the lower reaches of Wolli Creek and its immediate surroundings on a then and now basis, as this small and once so bright stream flowed sluggishly through its bull-rush (Cumbunga) fringed banks, over-topped by casuarina and paper-bark trees and overlooked by the steep-sided sandstone ramparts of Unwin's Hill to reach its estuarial marsh-lands.

A geological theory has been expressed that in former times the lower eastern flowing reach of Wolli Creek may have continued in this direction on a straight course, keeping south of the rocky knoll isolated within the grounds of Tempe House, before flowing into Cook's River at the inlet known as "THE BAY" (now reclaimed as Cahill Park). Even within comparatively recent times, a large semi-tidal lagoon was almost completely land-locked in this area, its northern shore being skirted by Arncliffe Street. The area is now covered by non-descript factories, but when first reclaimed, the rich soil was cultivated for market garden purposes and a large portion became the fenced pasture land of Grundy's dairy farm.

Before the advent of settlement, the alluvial flats bordering both banks of the stream, spread over a wide area of semi-swamp land, a portion of which reached southwards to the foot of the gentle slopes of Vinegar Hill, once under the ownership of Mr. Monk of bottled vinegar fame, but later subdivided as "THE KNOLL", whilst on the northern side, the low lands skirted the eastern slopes descending from the dividing spur named as "Unwin's Hill". This whole oft-times water-logged area was covered with casuarina, or Swamp Oak, trees - Cabbage-tree palms, the higher and drier terrain being covered with a dense forest of luxuriant brush growth backed by groves of golden wattle and huge Angophora (Sydney Red-Gum) Blackbutt and Ironbark trees, intermixed with "Old Man" Banksias, the upper ridges being crowned by high forest trees indigenous to the Hawkesbury sandstone region, together with a compact undergrowth intermixed with native flowers, such as Dillwynia, Pultenaea, Flannel-flower, Christmas Bush and Native Fuschia, in particular.

It is little wonder that an appreciative writer, in the columns of the Sydney Morning Herald of the 1880 period, expressed his opinion that the country-side in the vicinity of Cook's River was the most beautiful in the

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whole coast line of New South Wales. By all accounts, apart from its scenic beauty, the area was a paradise for birds, particularly of the aquatic species and the forest resounded to the cracking notes of the Coach-Whip bird (*Psophodes Olivaceus*) whilst the creek-sides edges were haunted by quail and the tidal mud-patches afforded food to dotterals, stilts and all manner of migratory water-fowl which frequent the margins of rivers and sea-shores.

The first destructive engineering intrusion into this primitive but once so beautiful land of marsh and tree-clad hills was brought about by the construction of the Illawarra Railway in the early eighteen-eighties. After crossing a low double span wrought-iron bridge over Cook's River, south of Tempe Station, the double tracks were carried along an embankment about eight feet in height and perhaps a quarter of a mile in length. The lines were thus kept well clear of the flood plain and the boundary fence kept the forest at bay. The "bull-roaring" whistle of the railway contractor's locomotive, which bore the name of "WESTWARD HO", may have been the first imperious sound to disturb the otherwise silent and tranquil water-side scene, sending the food-seeking birds scuttering in all directions.

In the early eighteen-nineties, the failure of the banking system created an appalling depression, making it imperative to find work for the great numbers of unemployed men. Unfortunately for the natural beauties of Wollli Creek and Cook's River, their salt-water sections captured the attention of unimaginative civil engineers associated with the New South Wales Public Works Department. These officials, in their lack of wisdom, sought to improve the once so attractive landscape by constructing revetment side-walls of hand-packed sandstone rubble along the banks, keeping them at a regular distance of so many feet apart, thus eliminating all the charming little shore extrusions and intrusions and intervening reed-covered hollows, in favour of converting both river channels into an artificial drain, completely destroying the picturesque environment in the process. The implementation of this project kept an army of men very busy for two or three years, including quarry men, boat-men and carters and also the great rank and file of labourers toiling in the muck and mire in order to eke out a meagre wage during this period of financial stress. The authors tend to be cynical when surveying the scene of the so-called improvements made in the days of yore in the name of environmental progress; it was certainly "scorched earth" development with a vengeance, an ugly territorial adjunct to the nearby Illawarra and East Hills Railways, as the travellers by train enter the land district of St. George.

In addition to the canalisation of the water-course, the authorities were responsible for the immediate areas surrounding the streams to be deprived of all natural growth and levelled to an uninteresting wind-swept expanse which to this day, eighty or so years later, has never recovered from its ruthless despoilation.

The dense casuarina forest which occupied the alluvial but slightly saline terrain at the eastern base of Unwin's Hill, bounded on the north by Cook's River and on the south, by Wollli Creek, was almost denuded of its trees, only a few being suffered to remain on a one-here and a one-there basis, but all had been felled by 1915. Portion of the resulting waste land,

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lying to the south of the intersecting Unwin's Bridge Road (later renamed as "Bayview Street") was set aside for week-end sporting fixtures as Wolli Park. These activities were discontinued when the local council decided to dump countless thousands of tons of household rubbish, including the body-work of at least one former electric tram-car, so mistakingly withdrawn from traffic. Unfortunately no municipal effort has been made to re-beautify this forlorn area, now known as Waterworth Park, by the planting of a waterside grove of trees in depth and thus restore the appearance, to a certain extent, of the original sylvan environment, and its leafy splendour.

Reverting to the activities of the Public Works Department, it would seem that their engineers were well pleased with their un-aesthetic efforts; they even created three tiny eyots (or islets) in the waterway, two at the western side and one at the eastern side of the Tempe Railway Bridge, each being planted with a solitary pine-tree and given a distinctive name, of which our knowledge is provokingly meagre. The tree planted on the eastern eyot eventually grew to quite large dimensions and its upper branches, unfortunately became a favourite perching place for fish-eating cormorants, but finally their excrement caused this, the last of the three trees, to die.

Unfortunately the two eyots on the western side of the bridge restricted the scouring action of the tidal flow, thus causing siltation problems in the way of surface-level mud-flats which within recent years led to their removal and to modifications to the adjacent revetment bank. However, the shoal has reformed and is exposed at low water, much to the edification of squawking Silver-gulls, who paddle the mud and slime with their webbed feet, in the hope of bringing worms and other edibles to the surface for immediate despatch. Long-legged Stilts also inspect the shoal, dainty visitors of pied black and white plumage and pink under-carriage, also with a knowledge of suitable tidal conditions necessary for their meal-time. On one auspicious occasion within recent years, a solitary pelican spent several days cruising the waterway immediately west of the railway bridge, to the surprise of observant train passengers, whilst on other occasions or rather on another occasion, three black swans stayed for over a week in the vicinity of the upper salt-water portion of Wolli Creek. The water has an average depth of about four feet and is too deep for wading birds to frequent, but the Fairy-Terns, or Sea-Swallows, are often to be noted carrying out their ceaseless skimming and plunge-diving exercises.

It may be of interest to note that the alluvial flat area lying between the north bank of Wolli Creek (originally known as Woolar Creek) and the south bank of Cook's River, together with the steep-sided eastern portion of Unwin's Hill, was included in the one hundred acre land grant originally made to Mr. F. W. Unwin, which became known as the Wanstead Estate. The land adjoining the eastern and southern bank of the saltwater section of Wolli Creek was incorporated in the grant made to William Packer who, in 1826, sold 100 acres to Alexander Brodie Spark who eventually built "Tempe House", thus bestowing the name of "Tempe" on the immediate farming area south of Cook's River.

In a southern and then western direction from its confluence with Cook's River, the lower mid-course of Wolli Creek formed one of the boundaries of

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the two above mentioned properties and also served to divide the West Botany (later Rockdale) and Canterbury Municipalities. Entering "The Valley" after a distance of about half a mile, the tidal section of the creek terminated in a deep waterhole surrounded on two sides by over-hanging sandstone ledges which have proved a death-trap for many young swimmers. The steep-sided south-eastern ramparts of the adjacent Unwin's Hill descend to reach water-level hereabouts; the slopes, long deprived of their indigenous forest growth, are now covered with a dense matting of dark-green ti-tree (*Kunzia*) bushes, intermingled with bright-green small-sized pittosporum trees. After its complete clearance of vegetation, the land surface of the opposite low-lying shore was devoted to water-meadows and pastures and later sub-divided into small farms, plant nurseries and vegetable gardens, with frontages to Arncliffe Street.

An underground section of the Western Suburbs Sewer Main emerged from beneath Unwin's Hill at this point and was carried across Wolli Creek by means of a two-span wrought-iron girder bridge, beyond which the two channels were encased within an ornate brick viaduct with its many arched spans leading southwards across the aforementioned meadowland for some distance before continuing its slightly falling course underground beneath the eastern extension of the low hillock known as "The Knoll". Adjacent to the sewer main, before it reached the girder bridge, is an over-flow chute which occasionally discharges its putrid burden into the creek, thus giving nutriment to large shoals of prawns, the presence of which was not un-noticed by local fisherman who netted their harvest at dusk and onwards through the night, attracting their prey by means of hurricane lamps. However, with the removal of the flood-gates hanging beneath the former wooden bridge at Tempe, carrying Princes Highway over Cook's River, the tidal waters became frequented by sharks, their unseen presence necessitating notices along the bank warning all and sundry of the dangers lurking beneath the surface of the tranquil waters, thereby ending most of the swimming and prawn-netting activities.

Within recent years, the southern revetment wall of lower Wolli Creek subsided at various places causing the tidal flow to form water-logged muddy pools, together with narrow ditches and trickles, thereby creating feeding grounds for a large aquatic bird population. One particular pool, about four inches in depth, is surrounded by a low growth of mangroves which have established themselves along the bank, thus forming a harbourage for mud-haunting animalcules of great personal interest to food-prospecting birds. Here an observant ornithologist may be fortunate to see, on occasion, a "paddling of Black Duck", Silver Gulls in plenty, Spoonbills, Ibis, Blue Herons, Egrets, Stilts and Spur-Winged Plover, amongst other feathered delights, together with all manner of migratory birds in their seasonal flights such as Godwits and tiny fast-flying Snipe. Azure Kingfisher, with their big brother Kookaburra, also survey the watery expanse and adjacent tussocks from the vantage point afforded by over-head wire cables, ready to pounce upon small crabs and all kinds of small crawling edibles inhabiting the bottom of the pond or the grass patches beneath their perching places.

For the botanist, there is a wealth of salt-marsh vegetation to be inspected, including low-growing patches of ruddy-hued samphire, where the

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land surface is subject to occasional tidal overflow. Several stunted pepper-trees grow along the banks, whilst a grove of castor-oil trees line the northern revetment wall of the stream, where, until a few years ago, a clump of scarlet-flowered coral-trees flourished in all their glory until butchered out of existence to provide space for an untidy litter of discarded motor-car bodies and other metal junk. Reverting to the southern bank, near the junction of the East Hills Railway, a solitary camphor-laurel of small stature, led a half-hearted existence over a shallow water-hole which may have served the watering-cans of Chinese gardeners in the days of yore. Where the marsh-land is above normal tide level and therefore often covered with fresh-water during rainy weather and numerous small isolated clumps of Coast Rush (*Juncus Maritimus*) each growing on its tiny elevation raised by its root-stock. Within recent years several specimens of feathery plumed pampas grass have appeared, evidently brought to the site when large quantities of rock mullock, said to have been discarded from the construction of extensions to the underground City Railway system, were spread along the western and northern sides of the East Hills Railway. The area generally is devoid of any colorful flowering plants, although at one period a wide patch of Autumn Crocus formed a pretty show until the plants were covered feet deep by the afore-mentioned engineer's mullock. These hundreds of bulbs evidently escaped from the former cottage garden of Pine Farm, the site of which is marked to-day by the splendid American Magnolia and odd shrubs in the immediate vicinity of the East Hills Railway Junction Signal Box.

Perhaps this particular man-created wasteland scene is best observed at dusk of a winter's day when the details of the broad foreground and enclosing hillsides east of Campbell's Hill at Earlwood are shrouded in cool-grey shadow and the red glow of the setting sun is reflected through cloud scapes on to the tranquil waters of the tidal section of Wolli Creek. This splendid spectacle is readily available to train travellers when in the vicinity of Tempe, providing they have an appreciation of simple but colourful natural beauty. There is also charm of another sort when the same terrain is noticed during the months of late Autumn, when white wispy mists of early morning gently rise above the water level.

The above essay deals specifically with the ecology of the salt-water section of Wolli Creek and may serve to convey a description of its desecration at the unimaginative hands of civil engineers in particular, until the present day ugliness has been achieved. It is of interest to learn recently that "A special committee has been named for the cleaning of Cook's River to overcome its pollution from industrial wastes and make it safe for swimming." However, one learned critic has expressed the thought that "The committee as appointed, does not have enough expertise to get something going properly" and judging by the results of previous committees and Improvement Leagues, he may be right, as the course of the river and its main tributary, Wolli Creek, are in a deplorable state.

A second ecological and historical survey paper, which deals with the lower fresh-water section of Wolli Creek to its junction with Stoney (or Bardwell) Creek, as it flows through the once-named "Town of Wincanton" and later on as "The Valley" from the old-time "Village of Arncliffe," is in course of preparation.

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NOTE: The authors feel at liberty, that they too have an interest in the beauty retention of Sydney's waterways and their conversion through neglect into becoming little more than badly polluted drains.

We are acquainted with the methods adopted to retain the lovely attractiveness of the River Thames in Southern England, in its upper reaches. Here a number of shallow weirs were provided, each with a series of hand-operated sluice-gates, to flush the silt build-up down stream, thus maintaining a water surface the full length of the stream, the spill of the water over the weir serving to aerate the flow. This method has proved most successful in practice.

No doubt the new Committee will remove the numerous siltation shoals and the accumulation of house-hold rubbish which the stormwater channel now holds. But the major beautification scheme would result when both banks are handed over to the control of the Forestry Commission with a view of having trees planted, not singly, but in depth, from the source of the river to the embouchure at Botany Bay. Then and then alone, will the community at large, have a Cook's River and a Wolli Creek, both historic and once beautiful waterways, in their midst, of which they can be well proud.