

Wetlands Heritage Trail : Town of Vincent

Background

Hyde Park and Smith's Lake are remnants of a chain of wetlands, lakes and swamps which existed in the area to the north of Perth when the Swan River Colony was founded by Captain James Stirling in 1829.

Most lakes were aligned in partly-linked systems. Just north of the main Perth ridge there were lakes Sutherland, Irwin and Kingsford in one complex; further to the west lay lakes Georgiana, Monger and Herdsman in what was known as 'The Great Lakes District'. The northern system consisted of lakes Stone, Poulett [First Swamp], Thomson and Henderson. North of them lay Second and Third Swamps and Three-Island Lake. In the early days alternative names were used popularly, particularly with regard to land occupancy, eg. Mew's Swamp or Lake Thomson, or Padbury's Lake for Lake Sutherland. Many of these wetlands were interconnected and in wet seasons the waters joined up, finding their way into the Swan River at East Perth, through Claise Brook [originally named Clause or Claise Creek]. Apart from some partial reclamation at Thomson Lake by Thomas Mews ['Mew's Swamp'], probably by land-filling to provide land for vegetable growing, little effort was made to reclaim swampy ground during the first quarter-century of colonisation.¹

The wetlands had provided suitable camping spots for the Aborigines for thousands of years during the dry season. When most other lakes were reduced to almost nothing these 'supplied them with drinking water and an abundance of game'² and with important dietary additions in the form of proteins and fats. 'The bulk of the[ir] diet comprised carbohydrate staples derived from fruits and seeds, bulbs and corms, underground root tubers, and starch-filled stems or rhizomes'³. Foraging in Hyde Park and Smith's Lake also added

¹ Beckle, H. & Gentilli, J., 'History of Perth Lakes' in Royal Western Australian Historical Society, *Early Days*, vol 10, part 5, 1993, p.445

² *Ibid.*, p.21

³ " , p.443

Frogs, normally buried in the mud in the summer, and tortoises, [which] were an important, reliable source of protein and fat. Swans and ducks, more or less plentiful according to the season, were caught by hand [at moulting time] or hit with spear or boomerang, or patiently snared with a noose.⁴

It is believed that the existence of these wetlands on the northern side was one of the reasons for Captain Stirling's choice of the site for Perth in 1829. Rod Giblett in 'A City and its Swamp Setting'⁵ suggests that it was also for military reasons as the 'narrow ridge of land between the Swan River to the south and an interlocking network of swamps and lakes to the north...protected [the area] from land attack from both directions'⁶. However, while they were well placed strategically, the wetlands were also a significant barrier to expansion northwards and 'provided a challenge that was eventually to lead to the complete alteration of a distinctive landscape and its ecology'⁷.

The new settlers were from the United Kingdom and did not appreciate the scenic aspects of these wetlands or lakes which were so very different from those they had been used to.

At home, a lake is known only as a sheet of water which seldom or ever is dried up, and it is naturally associated in one's mind with pleasant and picturesque scenery, but here it is quite different...there is an air of desolation about these lakes which strikes the spectator at once... It is complete still life without one point of interest in it, as far as striking scenery goes, and totally different from anything I ever saw outside Australia.⁸

These Europeans did, however, appreciate their economic value from the beginning. The presence of fertile soil and permanent, or at least long-lasting, ground water alongside the wetlands enabled land holdings to be used for dairy farms or market gardens. One such area was Mr Loton's paddock in which he grazed his cows. This

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Giblett, Rod, 'A City and its Swamp Setting' in Giblett, R. & Webb, H., *Western Australian Wetlands* [Wetlands Conservation Society Inc, 1966],

⁶ *ibid.*, p.127

⁷ Beckle, Hugo, 'The Wetlands Lost: Drainage of the Perth Lake Systems' in *Western Geographer*, vol 5 [1-2] June 1981, p.23

⁸ quoted in Giblett, p.128

was the site of Stone's Lake which later became known as Loton Park - now Perth Oval. [Later on other industries that needed a great deal of water such as commercial laundries were also located in these areas.] Then, with a population increase of 'nearly five-fold between 1850 and 1884'⁹ [partly due to the importation of convict labour from Britain from 1850 to 1868], there was a substantially increased demand for food. This, in turn, led to a marked 'increase in the number of market gardeners in the town... This growth was possible only with the draining of the swamps behind the town.'¹⁰ The increasing population growth meant there was also pressure to expand the city area northwards as well and to find new land for housing, roads, and commercial and industrial concerns. Such expansion could only take place by filling in or draining the wetlands.

Drainage was also required in areas where settlement had already taken place. The situation was very difficult in winter when most of the wetlands system through what is now the Town of Vincent were completely covered with water and, when the rains were heavier than usual as in the winter of 1853, it resulted in considerable damage to property and public outcry. The debate about the value of the wetlands and the question of their drainage raged for many years. There was the common belief that the wetlands posed a threat to public health through various diseases [during the wet season], to be contended with as well.

The problem of the threat the swamps posed to the health of the residents and workers persisted for many years.

Yet it was perhaps more the demand for space for market gardens, rather than the desire to improve the health of the population, which gave the final impetus for drainage. The demand for market garden space was purely the product of population pressure.¹¹

In March 1854, a special committee expressed the opinion

That the water in the lakes and swamps at the back of Perth from Lake Irwin to Claise Brook should be entirely removed by drainage, to avoid the danger of malaria and gain benefit from reclaimed land for gardens. It was found,

⁹ Giblett, p.131

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ “

however, that reclamation by filling would be too expensive, and a barrel brick-lined drain was recommended instead. The Sutherland-Irwin-Kingsford lake chain was drained into Claise Brook, via Wellington Street and Water [now Royal] Street, but the real drain only began at Lake Kingsford, into which were led the waters of the two upstream lakes...

That the concept was sound in principle may be judged from the fact that, apart from small local changes of position and various serious setbacks due to inadequate capacity of the drains, the route of the present drainage system is still the same.¹²

The Sutherland-Irwin-Kingsford lake system was drained in 1854 by the construction of a drain from Lake Irwin through to Lake Kingsford and the swamps which existed to the north of Wellington Street to Claise Brook. This was just an open cut and still quite inadequate during the heavy winter months. Furthermore, after nearby wetlands [on higher ground] were also drained through Lake Kingsford, it was found that the drain was not capable of carrying off so much water. In 1858 Surveyor General J.S. Roe reported that after recent heavy rains the locality was

completely covered with water, which the present system of drainage is entirely inadequate to convey away. In the winter of the following year, flooding again threatened landowners. Extensive rains of this season have accumulated water in the Perth lakes faster than it can be carried off by the present trunking and drains to Claise Brook.¹³

The winter of 1862 brought

Incessant rain for 3 weeks [and] the Great Flood in Perth... At the rear of the city there was one vast lake; gardens, and in many cases houses, being completely within its influence... The 'vast lake' extended from Murray Street north to Brisbane Street, leaving two or three buildings clear of water.

At last, in 1864, public works carried out by convict labour included the beginning of the reconstruction of the drain 'at the back' of Perth, along

¹² Beckle & Gentilli, p.447

¹³ J.S. Roe quoted in Beckle, p.26

Wellington Street... General maintenance of the drain continued for some years, but it was obviously inadequate, even though it came to be known as the Main Drain.¹⁴

Problems with flooding were also known to have occurred in the winter of 1871 which 'was exceedingly wet and caused extensive floods. A cyclone in March 1872 exacerbated the demand for improved drainage.'¹⁵ Lake Henderson,

a reedy swamp in an area along Fitzgerald Street, was drained after 1872 to become the site of Chinese market gardens for many years. Lake Poulett [the old 'First Swamp'] was drained in 1872, serving for a time as the town rubbish dump and then being used by a group of Chinese as market gardens; it was partly used for the formation of Birdwood Square in 1914.¹⁶

Lake Thomson was drained in 1873 and Lake Georgiana was also drained sometime during the 1870s to make way for the westward extension of Newcastle Street as far as Loftus Street. Lake Sutherland was also drained for development purposes, a small part being retained as a small park at the corner of Aberdeen and Sutherland Streets which became known as Hamilton Square.

Third Swamp was set aside as a reserve in 1873. The area was

thickly grown with paperbark trees [and provided] a camping ground for Aborigines and later homeless people, and a popular resort for duck shooters. It was reduced to two small formal lakes with minute refuge islands, within what in 1899 was named Hyde Park. Three-Island Lake was reclaimed about the same time, and became a fairly large area of Chinese vegetable gardens. Later it was left as a swamp with considerable beds of rushes, until the City Council resumed it; its deepest part is retained as a small lake at the Fletcher Sports Pavilion.¹⁷

Lake Kingsford was the next to go.

The Perth Railway Station, originally to be built at Weld Square, was built in 1880 on the site of the reclaimed lake... The railway goods yards, not far to

¹⁴ Beckle & Gentilli, p.448

¹⁵ Beckle, p.29

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Beckle & Gentilli, pps 450-451

the north-west [later the site of the Entertainment Centre] were established over the former Lake Irwin.¹⁸

By 1880 Third Swamp [Hyde Park], and the remnants of Three Island Lake [Smith's Lake] were the only permanent lakes left in the Vincent area. Other wetlands in the chain which survived were Herdsman's Lake, Lake Monger and Jackadder Lake although today 'they are much altered by drainage, filling and 'development'¹⁹.

However, more work was needed on the drains if they were to function properly as the old lake sites were still subject to inundation... In 1897-98 the drainage system was upgraded but, by mid-1899, the main Wellington Street drain was nearing collapse. The Perth City Council began to replace open-cut and shallow drains with new drains laid 7 feet [2.1m] deeper and with about three times the capacity.

A branch of the Claise Brook Drain to serve the North Perth area was built in 1908. It joined the main drain at Lord Street, following Parry and Stirling Streets where it met its two branches, the one from Robertson park [Lake Henderson,...and the other flowing from Hyde Park through Birdwood Square [the former Lake Poulett or First Swamp...]. The first branch was extended in 1911 to drain Smith's Lake...along Charles Street north of Vincent Street. The Perth City Council bought the former lake area and reclaimed it further by draining, rubbish-tipping and land-filling, to provide building lots.²⁰

The Mounts Bay Drain was also constructed during the years 1907-1909. Built in three sections, it was used to drain

the areas originally covered by Lake Sutherland and Georgiana. The Perth City Gasworks were built on the 'public gardens' just north of Claise Brook in 1914, and in 1929, Tea-tree lagoon was finally filled in. Its north bank was then used for industrial buildings.²¹

The Perth City Council purchased Lake Henderson about 1912. The area was then reclaimed and used as a municipal park [Robertson Park] and tennis courts were

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Beckle, p.32

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.31

subsequently laid out on a significant portion of the area. In the 1920s the drain was extended from here through to Smith's Lake [and further north], thus removing all the surface water from the Smith's Lake area except after really heavy rains. It remained as an open drain until the 1960s when it was closed over along the rest of the route but still left open at Smith's Lake and Dog Swamp. Further changes occurred in 1939 when Bourke Street was extended across the lake with the aid of a 15 foot timber bridge.²²

Suggestions for redevelopment over the years included playing fields, an Olympic pool, housing but always the cost of filling held back its redevelopment. In 1955 the Perth City Council undertook a redevelopment of the area – 60 acres in all – which involved the reclamation, construction of a stormwater drain which connected to the main drain and the resumption of considerable amounts of privately-owned land for a new subdivision which included several new streets and cul-de-sacs such as Barnett Place. Many of the lots were offered back to those who had previously had their land resumed. Much of the filling was done by using the area as an industrial rubbish tip.

The land under this scheme – Smith's Lake Minor Town Planning Scheme was sold by auction in December 1963. The Len Fletcher Pavilion, was built in 1969 'by the Perth City Council [at a cost of \$180,000] to provide an indoor sports centre for several indoor sporting associations including the Amateur Gymnastics Association'²³. It was named after Councillor William Leonard Fletcher, one of the driving forces behind the Smith's Lake project and officially opened on 8 May 1969. A caretakers cottage was also erected alongside.

In 1966

It was estimated that 75 percent [200,000 hectares] of the wetlands of the coastal plain [including streams as well as lakes] had been lost. In the City of Perth [a proportion of which is now part of the Town of Vincent] the loss probably nears 99 percent... After a very rainy winter, water from Lake

²¹ Beckle & Gentilli, p.452

²² *The West Australian*, 29.9.1959; Lake, Sally, 'A Short History of Smith's Lake – North Perth' [June, 2001]

Kingsford had to be pumped from the basement of Boans [now Myer] store. The much later reclamation of Smith's Lake [Three-Island Lake in North Perth] also left a bad legacy: the houses of 14 people in Kayle Street have suffered structural damage, in some cases very serious, presumably by failure of the in-filled ground underneath.²⁴

In the case of the problems in Kayle Street, the Town of Vincent set up guidelines which included 'special deep foundations to ensure the same problem does not re-occur...'²⁵ 10 Some of the larger blocks were subdivided along Emmerson Streets and Barnett Place leading to the erection of several two storeyed homes where there had only been one previously. New Design Guidelines covered the land between Kadina and Albert Streets where the Brownes Dairy had been. The housing in this area consists of modern apartments and town houses and includes a new shopping centre.

The Macedonian Community Centre also suffered from problems with unstable foundations. This has also been rectified and the building recently received 'a complete facelift'²⁶. A further plus was the removal of the Town of Vincent works depot from Richmond Street to Osborne Park and the land was also subdivided for new housing.

The lake itself, a

tiny remainder of the once large swamp, has recently been changed from a concrete and lawn edged lake back to a more natural setting, with fringing vegetation of entirely local species of plants. This is to provide a habitat for frogs, invertebrates and nesting sites for water birds. The work is a project between the Claise Brook Catchment Group and the Town of Vincent, funded in part by Alcoa and the State Government through the Swan Canning Urban Landcare Program [SCULP].

²³ Lake, p.63

²⁴ Beckle & Gentilli, p.452

²⁵ Lake, p.65

²⁶ *ibid.*

Locals [both human and non-human] have responded to the project, helping with planting and weeding, and generally enjoying the new habitat.

Pobblebonk, Motorbike and Moaning Frogs have all been heard at the lake since the restoration project started and a tortoise was found trying to cross Kayle Street.²⁷

In 2002, Smith's Lake or Danjanberup [its Aboriginal name] was marked out as an important site on a new Wetlands Trail. Special seating was erected alongside a sculpture containing recordings of interviews with early residents on their memories of the wetlands in the area and specifically Smith's Lake. This trail which runs from The Macedonian Community Hall to Claise Brook was officially opened on Saturday 13 April 2002 by the Mayor of Vincent, Mr Nick Catania.

²⁷ Lake, p.66

Bibliography

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