

RAIPR Tour Notes

Yarra Valley Park - 31/3/1993

Good morning, and welcome to Yarra Valley Park. Yarra Valley is more commonly known as the Premier Park. Yarra Valley Park is the largest of the urban parks, consisting of over 1,400 hectares, and is a magnificent environmental community asset. Being very diverse in its complexities, and continually posing challenges in its development and management.

The Yarra River, Melbourne's primary water course, which flows through and links the whole park, holds a special place in the culture, history and geography of Melbourne.

The park contains a wonderful diversity of features, from remnant bushland/grassland/wetlands, archaeological sites of significance to the Wurundjeri, historic links to Melbourne's early European settlement, grazing and orcharding scenes, and landscape vistas made famous by the Heidelberg school of artists. The park provides an important visual and recreational asset to the people of Melbourne, with well over 300,000 people living within 5 kilometres of its boundaries, and over 1.5 million visitors each year, enjoying a wide variety of park experiences - picnicking, walking, canoeing, exploring nature, cycling, and much more.

Yarra Valley Park is also a major part of Melbourne's open space Bay to Ranges network, with important linkages to the neighbouring parks of Yarra Bend, downstream of Burke Road, Plenty Gorge park to the north, on the Plenty River, and Warrandyte State Park.

Yarra Flats

The section we are now travelling along is known as the boulevard, and you are looking out over the Yarra Flats area. Yarra Flats consists of the river corridor, abounding in birdlife, wetlands and partial and heritage landscapes. The focus in this area for park management is to ensure high quality informal recreation, eg. walking, cycling and bird watching, while conserving and enhancing the area's many natural attributes, as well as those of cultural and heritage significance, such as the aboriginal scar trees and artefacts site, and sites of significance to the Heidelberg school of landscape paintings.

One of the key objectives during this financial year has been to develop a management plan for the re-vegetation of the promontory paddock and restoration of one of the wetlands within the promontory paddock. This plan is in its final stages of public consultation with local residents and special interest groups. Once this is completed, staff will commence staged implementation of the plan.

The Yarra Flats has low visitor numbers in relation to its picnic facilities, however, its main walking trail, which stretches 2.8 kilometres, from Banksia Street to Burke Road, is very popular, particularly with the elderly, and a number of the disabled groups. This is due to its flat terrain, the peaceful landscapes it presents, and the many secluded little open areas where people can just sit and relax.

One of the aims of the management plan was to attempt to attract more visitors to use the picnic facilities, with the construction of one or two picnic type shelters which would be in keeping with the 1900s building era. The area deliberately has no barbecue facilities, however, visitors are invited to bring their own portable gas barbecues. This has proved to be most successful over the years.

The Annulus Billabong is one of a number of natural billabongs that occur on the middle and lower Yarra Flood Plain. These magnificent remnants are the last of what was a vast flood plain and wetland system.

In an effort to ensure their long term survival and enhancement, park staff are working with the Riverlands Protection Society of Heidelberg, in producing management plans for various billabongs and wetland systems.

During 1992, the Riverlands Protection Society obtained a grant from the Open Space 2000 system to undertake water quality testing and research the ecology of the billabong and the biology of some of the faunal species which inhabit it. This project has now been extended to cover Banyule Billabong, Banyule swampland, and Boland Billabong.

Park staff, in conjunction with members of the Riverlands Protection Society and staff from the Lands and Waterways Division of Melbourne Waters Yarra Region, have combined their resources to ensure that the study addresses all the issues, and that comprehensive, usable data is obtained for the production of long term management plans.

Banyule Billabong/Swampland

The magnificent views going from the rear of the Banyule Gallery, which extend well across the Yarra Valley and on to the Dandenong Ranges, are an intricate part of the provision of conservation and recreational opportunities at the Yarra Valley Park. These views, and many others like them, have been hard fought for, and the subject of many planning documents, such as the Middle Yarra Concept Plan, and local conservation strategies.

As well as the Banyule Billabong, the swampland to the rear of the billabong is the last remaining natural swampland left on this section of the Yarra flood plain.

Recent fauna surveys have indicated several regional significant faunal species, one state, and two international species.

The area is also very significant to the Wurundjeri, and provided them with abundant fresh water fish, eels, and fresh water mussels, as well as the numerous species of terrestrial fauna. Once again, there are numerous artefact sites within and around the billabong, and several scar trees in the local vicinity.

Park staff, in conjunction with the Heidelberg Council Conservation Staff, three local community groups, the Banyule Wetlands Education Study Centre and staff from Melbourne Waters Yarra Region Lands and Waterways, have produced a management plan for this area.

Part of this process was to identify the most desirable route for the main Yarra trail, so as not to impinge on the regional significance of heritage and conservation of the billabong, and its future potential. This portion of the Main Yarra Trail, which consists of 1.9 kilometres of sand surfaced track, is scheduled to be completed by June 1993, and will be the final link between Fitsimons lane at Westerfolds Park and the Central Business District of Melbourne. This enables people to cycle, walk or jog from inner Melbourne along the Yarra River some 36 kilometres to Templestowe.

The Banyule Wetlands Education Centre is an initiative from the Banyule High School and Melbourne Water Staff to create a wetland study centre which will focus on the Banyule Billabong/Swampland and surrounding wetland/river systems.

An incorporated management group, made up of various agencies, individuals and community groups, oversees the implementation of the project and particularly the fund raising for the centre. Various avenues have been pursued for raising funds, including the successful application to the Commonwealth Government for a \$48,000.00 grant. This was presented to the Banyule Wetland Study Centre by Ros Kelly earlier in the year.

Banksia Park

Prior to Melbourne Water owning this particular section of Yarra Valley Park, the area had been used as a silt borrow pit for soil for sale in nurseries and other areas, and had also been used as a non-putrescible rubbish dump area. After much hard work, restoration and tree planting, the area was the first part of Yarra Valley Park to be open to the public, in March 1979.

The area is a most popular picnic area, and from cup weekend through to the end of daylight savings, ranger staff often need to lock the front gates as early as 11.30 - 12.00pm on some weekends, as the park is full to capacity.

The issue of overcrowding and damage to the environment of this section of the park were well recognised within the management plan, with recommendations being to moat other areas of the park, such as Birrarrung and Yarra Flats Park, in an effort to attract people away from Banksia and into these other areas. As well, at the busy times of the year, no bookings for groups over 50 are generally allowed.

Westerfolds Park

Westerfolds has been the subject of much contention over many years. The original zoning for Yarra Valley Park in this vicinity was for a 100 metre strip fronting the Yarra River. However this property was purchased by a developer for sub-divisional purposes, and the inclusion of a golf course. A very strong and vocal local community petitioned the government at the time to set the area aside as public open space. This petition was successful, and in 1975, the State Government purchased the land for the people of Victoria, and it was managed initially by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

In 1978, the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works had this portion of land transferred to them for management, although it remains crown land.

The park has slowly developed and is the most heavily used area of Yarra Valley Park at present, and provides the most diverse range of recreational opportunities in a peaceful and conservation setting. This concept was the major point and well emphasised in the community workshops and submissions made during the recent formulating of the Yarra Valley Park Management Plan.

Westerfolds itself provides many open Woodland/Grassland vistas, fringed by the Yarra River and a number of small wetlands, which provide a habitat for a diverse range of terrestrial and aquatic fauna. Westerfolds also hosts a number of significant remnant native grassland/herbland areas, and these are being carefully managed and enhanced by park staff and community groups. The main grassland area has had a management plan produced for it by park staff and students from the Burnleigh Horticultural College.

In an effort to reduce soil erosion of Kestrel creek, which runs through the centre of Westerfolds Park to the Yarra, and the decline of remnant vegetation along the creek, a retarding type basin and silt litter and pollutant trap has been constructed at the point where the creek enters Westerfolds Park. Although in its initial stages of stabilising, it would appear that the intent of the retarding basin is being achieved. However, this is a long term project, and needs to be

done in conjunction with careful re-vegetation and management down the entire length of the stream.

The Hawthorn Clinker brick house on the hill was built in 1936, and is currently used for the Park Administrative Centre, Conference Facility, and provides meeting rooms for such groups as the Friends of Yarra Valley Park, and other special interest groups who use the park.

Petty's Orchard

The Petty property was purchased in 1982 from the Petty family, who had a long family history of orcharding in the Doncaster area. The orchard has been maintained, both on a viable commercial basis, and as an historical precinct depicting the history of orcharding in the Doncaster/Templestowe area, and a genetic bank of over 150 apple varieties. This genetic bank is not only a valuable historic resource for interpretation in allowing the community to taste some of the jewels of past apple varieties, but it also provides opportunity to use the genetic bank for the production of future varieties of apples.

The area is open to the public over the year on a bookings-only basis, with a number of major functions during the year, such as the Petty's Orchard festival, which is generally held in the mid-to late-March period, and in recent years has had numbers in excess of 20-25,000 people attend the days.

The area to the east of the carpark and genetic bank area is a major wetlands system, which was installed by park staff in 1984 to improve water quality from the subdivisions which abut the park to the south. It has proved a most successful venture, and offers a wide range of opportunities for interpretation on land and water management, and how agricultural practices can be pursued in environmentally sensitive manners, and how remnant vegetation and wildlife species are a bonus to the agricultural industry.

As a result of the completion of the Yarra Valley Park Management Plan last year, the park this year will produce a management plan specific to the Petty's Orchard precinct and the immediate surrounding areas, which include also the Market Garden to the south-west, which will guide us in its management and development over the next five to ten years.

Yarra Valley park thanks you for your attendance and interest in the park today, and hopes you return to enjoy some of the unique and diverse experiences available within the park.

Patrick Fricker
Manager,

Yarra Valley Park.