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A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACKBURN LAKE

This brief history of Blackburn Lake Sanctuary is reprinted from the Resource Guide, produced in 1999 by the Blackburn Lake Sanctuary Advisory Committee, on the occasion of the Blackburn Heritage Federation Picnic, 19th March 2000.

Reflecting on our local heritage may lead to a greater appreciation of the present and conservation for the future.

If you have memories or photographs of the Sanctuary and surrounding area that you would like to share, please contact one of the volunteers.

Additional reading:
Blackburn: A picturesque history. Robyn da Costa. 1978
Windows on Nunawading. Diane Sydenham. 1990

History of Blackburn Lake

In the early days before the lake was formed, we can assume that a little creek gurgled its way down the valley from Mitcham to Blackburn on its way to the Yarra River. It would have been joined along the way, particularly in winter, by many little rivulets and streams; some of these gullies can still be seen as you walk around the lake today. In summer, the creek may even have dried up at times. The local Wurundjeri people hunted and gathered along the waterways.

Early days

- mid 1850 - The Crown first disposed of land in the Nunawading district.

- 1880's - The Lake itself was formed by the damming of Gardiner's Creek. The valley flooded to form the lake, which has a steep embankment on the western side and more swampy edges along the eastern side. It was initially about 50 feet deep where the creek had been mined for antimony, but recent studies show that it is not that deep today, having silted up. The Freehold Investment & Banking Company, an early land speculative syndicate in Blackburn, is credited with having built it for the purpose of enhancing land values & provide water for local orchardists.

- 1888 – Lake Road bridge built of handmade Blackburn bricks.

Picnic excursions

- 1889 – The Company built a refreshment room & a jetty at the water's edge. Four rowing boats were available for hire. Picnic excursions were organised from Melbourne, & the passengers rode in converted cattle trucks: the journey took up to 2 hours by steam train.

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Heidleberg artists

- 1893 – Around this time, the artist Frederick McCubbin set up his easel in the bushland surrounding Blackburn Lake & painted some of his best known works, eg. "Down on his Luck" & "The Bush Burial". His home, where he lived for a short time, was situated at Lot 52(no. 7) Wolsley Crescent. Blackburn Lake was to have been the centerpiece of a model township planned during the boom years of the 1880's. In the 1890's, the land boom burst, & the Freehold Investment & Banking Co went bankrupt. The legacy of their planning – curving streets, tree planting & the Lake itself, as a focal point, remain today as an excellent example of the "garden suburb" type of urban planning.

- 1903 – The Blackburn Lake Paddock was first subdivided for sale.

Adult Deaf Society

- 1909 – The Adult Deaf & Dumb Society (now Victorian Deaf Society), purchased a 75 acre (30.4 ha) block which included the Lake. They built a substantial home in Central Road, established a men's wing, cleared the land & cultivated a flower farm. A women's wing was later constructed. The property was known as "Lake Park", a place for the "aged, infirm & feeble minded deaf mutes" to live & work in, growing flowers & vegetables, for selling at the Victoria Market.

Flower Farm

- 1916 – 14 acres were under cultivation, the remaining land remained uncleared with an abundance of wildflowers. The flower farm grew beds of narcissi, gladioli, chrysanthemums, dahlias, carnations, roses, gaillardias, violets, jonquils, daffodils & watsonias.

- 1914 -1918 – during the war years, large gatherings of wounded soldiers were frequently brought to the Lake for picnics, as part of their recuperation. On these occasions, the whole northern bank would be dotted with groups of soldiers & nurses.

- 1921 – Following a decision by the High Court, the flower sales ceased, as a charity could not earn money & would be liable to pay rates.

Learn to Swim

- 1920's, diving towers were erected. The Herald "Learn to Swim" was held & continued until 1931, the water must have been much cleaner than it is now! Many major swimming carnivals were held but the Blackburn Swimming Club was forced to close in 1931 due to vandalism of the facilities.

The bushland

- Because the Lake was owned by the Adult Deaf and Dumb Society its immediate surrounds were protected from development for many years after the society ceased to use the property as a flower farm.

Protecting the area

- 1938 - Residents feared the loss of this environment. The Blackburn Progress Association was keen to acquire the lake and surrounding land for development as a public reserve. The government promised to assist with "improvements, construction of baths etc." While ownership of the entire 75 acre site remained in the hands of the Adult Deaf and Dumb Society, the area continued to be popular with the general public.

- 1954 - The Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Planning Scheme zoned the area around the Lake as public open space but it was still owned by the Adult Deaf and Dumb Society.

- 1962 – The MMBW (now Melbourne Water), decided to deepen the Lake to form a ponding basin, to stop flash flooding. This would have meant complete destruction of the "natural" Lake concept. Many local conservationists urged the Nunawading Council to discuss with MMBW an alternative plan. Nunawading Council invited Edna Walling & Ellis Stones "to give an opinion on the Lake's potential". Both ranked the Lake area with the Botanical gardens of Melbourne. The Council accepted their findings & a plan was developed to build a retaining wall & outlet at the southern end of the Lake. It would be constructed in such a manner, that the vegetation surrounding the Lake's edge would not be destroyed.

- 1950's & 60's, high intensity & often incompatible uses of the Lake, such as: speed-boating, water skiing, illegal rubbish dumping, (there are supposed to be old cars at the bottom), canoeing, yachting, fishing & open fire barbecues began to threaten the fragile environment. The sensitive vegetation along the lake fringe, which is a vitally important habitat for wildlife, was destroyed in many parts.

- 1962 - the dam wall in Lake Rd was built by the MMBW to form a retarding basin to prevent flooding further down Gardiners Creek, and the picturesque Lake Rd Bridge (as shown on our postcards available from the Visitor Centre) was demolished in 1965.

  Before this, residents recall having to change shoes on the north side of the Lake Rd Bridge and don gumboots to cross "boggy hollow" as it was locally known!

- 1964 – The Adult Deaf Society sold 13.4 ha, including the Lake & some surrounding bushland to the MMBW & Camberwell Grammar purchased 6.5ha of land east of the Lake.

Becomes a Sanctuary

- 1965 – A Committee of Management, of local residents, was formed to preserve the flora & fauna. Blackburn Lake was declared a "Sanctuary" by Council in response to concern over motor boating on the Lake.

- Early 1970s – Adult Deaf Society demolished their premises & constructed a new complex further west, at the corner of Central & Lake Roads. During the summer months, when the grass dries, the foundations of the old home, dormitories & outsheds are clearly visible on the lawn between the playground and the Visitor Centre.

- 1975 – Following extensive efforts by local residents, the City of Nunawading purchased 14.3 acres (5.8 ha).

- 1976 – A further 33.1 acres (13.4 ha) purchased by the City of Nunawading. An environmental assessment & master plan was prepared by the Committee of Management & Nunawading Council.

First Management Plan

- 1980 – Land owned by Camberwell Grammar, south of the Lake, came under threat of subdivision. Following a report on the land, prepared by the Committee of Management, the area was acquired by the City of Nunawading, bringing the total area of Blackburn Lake Sanctuary to 63.8 acres (25.8 ha). Deliberate measures to reduce visitor impact & encourage regeneration began. The network of walking tracks & access to the Lake's edge was reduced & stabilised with landscaping to reduce erosion. Several areas were fenced off, including the old picnic site

Education Program

- 1985 – Friends of the Lake Education Program was initiated

- 1986 – A revised Blackburn Lake Master plan was prepared.

- 1991 – The Visitor Centre extended to accommodate the expanding Education Program. The project, jointly funded by Nunawading Rotary Club, State Government Eastern Area Scheme & Council cost $143,000. An hexagonal activity room, storage areas, & landscaping including pond & enclosed courtyard were built.

- 1992 – Land for Wildlife status achieved.

- Council purchases 0.5 ha along Central Road, at the north east corner of the Sanctuary, from the MMBW.

- 1994 – Fire burns 8 ha of bush to the east of the Lake & reburns 4 ha of bush in 1997.

- 1995+- Major playground upgrade & extensive lake edge revegetation works begin. Committee of Management became Advisory Committee.



It belongs to the community now

- 1998 – Final payment made on the Camberwell Grammar land.