New Park

The creation of Rockbeare Park, straddling the cities of Northcote and Heidelberg, is one of Melbourne's more heartening examples of citizen action and landscape redevelopment. Sue Course, the founding secretary of the Rockbeare Park Conservation Group, tells the history of the Darebin Creek Parklands in an extract from the booklet Darebin Parklands, and the history surrounding the group's involvement with the reclamation of this forgotten part of metropolitan Melbourne.

In 1973 a small group of local citizens banded together to restore a neglected park in a bush setting only 9 kilometres from the centre of Melbourne. They formed the Rockbeare Park Conservation Group whose aim was to restore Rockbeare Park, an area of 5.68 hectares in Ivanhoe and eventually to extend the area of parkland to include the 20 hectares of private land adjoining it.

A programme of action was taken to draw public attention to the project and to enlist the assistance that would become necessary at various steps in the overall plan. Many letters, petitions and submissions were sent to Federal and State Governments and local Councils. Guided walks to show people the attractions of the area were held at intervals and efforts were made to gain public interest. It was largely through the backing of Heidelberg and Northcote Councils, the State and Federal Governments and the sympathetic attitude of the local newspaper that the persistence of local residents was rewarded.
At the same time restoration works were carried out on the neglected Rockbeare Park which for many years had been used only to graze horses from the local riding school. Until 1977, when council funds became available all weeding and planting was done with borrowed tools. The major problem was to prevent the spread of noxious weeds which included blackberry, boxthorn, artichoke thistle and boneseed. Small areas were painstakingly cleared and replanted by volunteers and Ivanhoe Grammar pupils.

The planting of native trees in the area began in May 1974 under the late Ellis Stones, one of the pioneer landscape architects. He directed the early stages of the design and supervised the first voluntary activities. Three hundred saplings, donated by the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, were planted and, as Ellis directed, he taught. Each year since his death planting has continued as further areas have been cleared.

This public enthusiasm encouraged the Northcote Council to agree, in 1975, to purchase two sections of privately owned land with the aid of Federal Government funds. Two years later the State Government proposed a dollar for dollar grant to assist the Council to buy the rest of the area which contained some of the most interesting features of the landscape.

During 1977 a landscape plan, jointly funded by Heidelberg and Northcote Councils, was being completed by the Centre of Environmental Studies at the University of Melbourne. Later that year an Interim Committee of Management was formed, consisting of Heidelberg and Northcote councillors and council officers, a member of the Rockbeare Park Conservation Group and the Northcote Civic Group (South-East Ward).

Funds for maintenance and development have been limited but the Rockbeare Park Conservation Group provides much of the workforce both through its membership and by enlisting the aid of schools, scouts, forestry students and Junior Field Naturalists. Advice and assistance have been freely given by a number of experts.

The maintenance of planted areas has called for a continuing level of community involvement. Until a reticulated supply was installed, tending the plants was an arduous task requiring bucket brigades to transport water from neighbouring houses. The heavy work was done by Ivanhoe Grammar students, unemployed youths and members of the Rockbeare Park Conservation Group which included a retired husband and wife team who devoted their energy to a very dry and desolate area.

These projects were followed by more ambitious construction works. In 1979 an engineer member of the Group designed and supervised the building of the first bridge across the Darebin Creek in the parklands. Aided by a number of volunteers, the bridge was completed over many weekends. It joined the two sections of parkland and ended the era where wading through the creek was the only means of crossing. The next year a ranger's hut of concrete and redgum sleepers was built.

Since March 1979 the Interim Committee has employed a ranger part-time. Besides his Park Management work he is responsible for organising the work of volunteers and taking groups of school children on nature rambles.

From the early days of the Rockbeare Park Conservation Group the importance of records was realised. Professional skills were recruited to investigate, photograph, map the area and plan for its reclamation and development as open space.
In 1977 a sub-committee was formed to compile a book on the park using both the data already collected and that available by additional research. Each member of the sub-committee undertook to write a paper on a specific topic which would illustrate the land's past use and abuse, its plant and wildlife population and indicate ways of reaching its full potential. Thus papers were written on community participation, history, geology, plants, birds, creatures and the parkland design. The committee was fortunate in co-opting expertise in editing, art work and design. The cost of printing was funded jointly by the Heidelberg and Northcote councils and the booklet entitled, *Darebin Parklands*, was published early in 1980. 

The history alone involved one year of data collecting. The two areas comprising the Darebin Parklands were divided by a creek and hence developed separately. The Ivanhoe side was part of the Rockbeare Estate which was subdivided in 1888. The large bluestone Rockbeare House, built in 1857 by Thomas Hutchins Bear, still remains as does Rockbeare Park which bore his vineyards and fruit trees.
As differing types of development occurred on each side of the Darebin Creek so too did each side possess a different geological composition. Silurian mudstones, 420 million years old, form outcrops on the Ivanhoe side while the more recent basalts which poured from volcanoes 800,000 years ago, dominate the Alphington side. Of particular interest are the tesselated basalt paving and silurian cliffs.

The plant section of the book describes and illustrates some of the indigenous, introduced and noxious weeds of the parklands. The indigenous plants include river red gums, yellow box, several wattles and native tree violet. The section on birds contains over sixty bird species sighted in the area. It is followed by a paper on other fauna found during surveys of the park.

The booklet concludes with an outline of the Landscape Plan. This plan was undertaken around a passive recreation theme and utilised the two assets of the site, the creek and the open spaces. The predominantly native planting will be used to define a series of interconnected spaces, so that different groups can use the park without interference.

Paths, playgrounds, picnic areas, more bridges and entrances will be constructed. The major concepts of the design are being adhered to wherever practicable but due to limitation of finance it will be many years before the plan is completed. This year a new entrance is being built on the Alphington side. The park is being more heavily planted than the plan suggests for a number of reasons.

The enthusiasm for the Darebin Parklands is evident in the ever increasing interest in the park and the recognition of the work taking place there. Last year 3000 indigenous plants were planted by volunteers; this year a similar programme is underway. In 1980 the Interim Committee of Management was awarded a citation in the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Victorian Chapter) Robyn Boyd Environmental Award.

Note: 1.
Individual chapters authored by Sue Course, Bill Cleveland, Jan Schapper, Anthea Fleming, Wendy Clarke and Jeremy Pike.
THE HISTORY

Reprinted from Darebin Parklands, A study of a land reclamation and Conservation project at Ivanhoe and Alphington, Victoria, Rockbeare Park Conservation Group, Victoria.

The history of the Darebin Parklands has been traced back to early settlement. Its interest lies not only as a record of the past, but in the ways it has affected the present, as will be evident not only in the history but in other sections of this study.

Even to the casual observer, the evidence of past land use has left many marks on the Darebin Parklands. There is a strange assortment of neglected fruit trees including olives, mulberries, quinces, plums and an occasional orange and almond. There are also the remains of several bluestone weirs which used to irrigate the orchards, sections of post and rail fences and a sweeping driveway lined with basalt chips, still in remarkably good condition, but leading nowhere. A ridge of pine trees, showing obvious gaps in the original spacing where there have been a few casualties, follows what was reputed to be one of the first wagon tracks to Heidelberg. In areas where the terrain was unsuitable for cultivation the native vegetation still exists, fighting to survive amongst the influx of noxious weeds.

The Government Surveyor, Hoddle and his party, surveyed the Darebin Creek area in 1837, but reference was only made to sheep runs in the vicinity. In accordance with his usual practice of using aboriginal names, he called the land to the east of Darebin Creek on the Ivanhoe side, Keelbundoora, and to the west on the Alphington side, Jika Jika.

The two areas of the Darebin Parklands, being divided by a creek, were developed separately in accordance with a Government Order of 18th August, 1829, in which regulations for the selection and measurement of land were published. Except in special circumstances, no grant was 'to include both sides of the Water Course sufficiently important to be made a boundary'. Subdivision from Crown Land was the beginning of the various stages of development. Speculators and pastoralists were soon followed by wood cutters and farmers, which finally led some fifty years later to the small subdivisions of suburbia.

The first landowners were mainly speculators from Sydney, often purchasing the land without ever having seen it. As the two sides of the Darebin Creek were developed independently under different owners, they will be dealt with separately.

KEELBUNDOORA (IVANHOE)

At the first sales of Victorian Country lands in Sydney on 12th September 1838, Thomas Walker purchased from the Crown Portion 1, parish of Keelbundoora, an area of 1,260 acres.

SUBDIVISION (IVANHOE)

1838 Thomas Walker (1,260 acres)
1853 Francis Clark
1867 Thomas Hutchins Bear

Bear bought the property in 1857, and built a large solid bluestone house which he named 'Rockbeare' on Darebin Hill. Somewhat altered, it still stands today at 8 Roeke Street, Ivanhoe. The tennis courts next to the house originally were the site of the kitchen, servants' quarters and stables. (A popular misconception among local residents is that the name 'Rockbeare' is a combination of Roeke and Bear, its
two early owners. Actually the combination is pure coincidence since evidence shows that the house was already called 'Rockbeare' in 1859 - over 20 years before Rocke purchased the property.)

In 1863 severe flooding damaged Bear's vineyard and orchard; other properties along the Darebin Creek were similarly affected. By 1876 Bear had changed residence and for over two years tried unsuccessfully to let "Rockbeare" before finally selling it to William Henry Rocke in about 1880.

Rocke (1836-82) came to Melbourne from Wales. He founded W.H. Rocke & Co., a profitable furniture warehouse, married and lived at Emerald Hill until 1870 when he purchased land in Ivanhoe, north of Waverley Avenue. By early 1880 he had acquired a holding of 70 acres, subsequently referred to as the Rockbeare Estate. Part of this property was rented out for orange groves. (Recent eradication of noxious weeds uncovered orange trees from the original stand on the northern slopes of Pine Ridge.) A further section was worked by Chinese market gardeners whose pleasant habit it was to give jars of ginger to purchasers of their vegetables. Heidelberg Shire records of the time show that the market gardeners applied for and obtained special licences to use 'night soil' as fertilizer for their crops.

Subdivision of Rockbeare Estate began in 1888. The first subdivision one of the earliest in Ivanhoe) involved land between Kenilworth Parade and Waverley Avenue, described in The Age auction advertisement of the time as 'the Toorak of the North'. Special features advertised were its proximity to the State School and railway, and inclusion of a park and a reserve. Since the land sale had been planned to coincide with the opening of the railway, inducements to attend the auction included 'Free Rail Passes' - a nice promotional touch which was to be thwarted by delay in the railway opening. Until recent years it was believed that Rockbeare Park itself had been transferred to public ownership with the 1888 subdivision; in fact it was sold to Heidelberg Council in 1929.

After Rocke's death, his widow Salisbury Ann Rocke gradually subdivided the rest of Rockbeare Estate. The second stage of the subdivision in 1911 left Rockbeare with only a few acres remaining. At this time the government was attempting to encourage settlement of outlying suburbs, and between 1910-14 free rail passes were offered as inducement to settlers. Gradually, open paddocks and market gardens gave way to suburbs although for many years residents still kept cows and poultry, and Heidelberg Shire Secretary received constant complaints about wandering cattle damaging vegetable plots and gardens.

Villas, eastern side, Darebin Parklands, (early twentieth century); The Bungalow, Waverley Ave., Ivanhoe (foreground).
Rockbeare Park and two building allotments adjacent to the entrance to the park were purchased in 1918 by Phillip Alexander Smith who resold the land to Herman Groth in 1923. A year later, Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School approached Groth, who agreed to sell, and the school paid a deposit. By 1927, with a depression looming, the school had to relinquish hopes for the Rockbeare site and asked for return of their deposit. Groth’s solicitor, however, had different ideas and countered by claiming a further £750 for loss of opportunity to dispose of the land during the intervening period. After failure of the transaction, Herman Groth sold to “The President, Councillors and Ratepayers of Heidelberg Shire” in 1929 for £2,000. The agreement included a 50-ft wide entrance from Rockbeare Grove (which appears to have been an afterthought). A further three acres of his land were acquired in 1935.

Until the 1940s Rockbeare Park was well used by local residents. The concept of acquiring the park for recreational purposes had been suggested as early as 1901 and newspaper articles of the period referred to it as a ‘rugged, almost natural wilderness’. The park was popular for Sunday School picnics and sporting organisations used the natural contours of the grassy slopes to accommodate thousands of spectators. Scout groups held rallies and corroborees there and local children used the area as a playground, sliding down the grass slopes and swimming in the creek’s deep waterholes. Yabbying and fishing were popular pastimes as was leech-collecting, which yielded a ready source of pocket money for those willing to collect the creatures for sale to Mr. Bailey, the local chemist. Leeches were then in common use for the treatment of severe bruising.

Artists found the area excellent for landscape painting, and in 1919 John Rowell moved in and built a house opposite ‘Rockbeare’. (The Rowell house was demolished in 1978 but his paintings of the area survive.)

Gradually Rockbeare Park became neglected and forgotten, possibly because its entrance was narrow and badly marked. Leased out to McLosky’s riding school for grazing horses, the park remained this way until 1974, when residents with support from Heidelberg Council took action to have the area rehabilitated.

JIKA JIKA (ALPHINGTON)

On the Alphington (Northcote) side, subdivisions from Crown land were smaller. Although the boundaries were vague, it seems that 176 acres were purchased by Thomas Wills in 1840 and this holding remained in his family for many years. An area of 122 acres, bought by William Roemer in the same year as the Wills purchase, was to change hands frequently over the next four decades.

Crown Land Subdivision (Alphington)

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Acres</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>William Roemer</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>James Manning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>Sir William Montague Manning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>Henry Morgan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>John Sharp Adams</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(portions of both subdivisions were purchased by Adams from Henry Morgan and Thomas Wills.)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Of the various owners in both the Ivanhoe and Alphington sides of the area, only Thomas Bear (Ivanhoe side) and John Sharp Adams (Alphington side) were to farm the land extensively.

The area purchased for £2,500 in 1880 by John Sharp Adams included 60 acres of the Darebin Parklands, and was to be retained by the Adams family for nearly eighty years. During this time, agricultural, pastoral and quarrying activities were carried on side by side.
John Sharp Adams arrived from Berkely, England in 1854. His unsuccessful attempts at gold-mining persuaded him to branch out into the more lucrative business of buying cattle at Newmarket and driving them to Woods Point and Marysville for sale to the miners. Later he also stocked groceries and stores, and occasionally would turn his hand to shearing.

In 1858 he married Maria Barton and took over her father's store, a bluestone building in Heidelberg Road, Alphington. Highly regarded by the local community, he spent the rest of his life there, serving for a time as member of the Heidelberg Shire Council.

By 1880 he had considerable property holdings in Alphington, Ivanhoe and other suburbs, and later moved to 'Ivy Cottage' a bluestone house on the Darebin Parklands while a large eight-roomed farmhouse he named 'Rockleigh' was being built next door. 'Rockleigh' (demolished 1956) stood adjacent to the corner of Separation Street and Yarana Road.

A driveway lined with elm trees swept from the railway to the house beyond. It included the still existing Mulberry Drive (so called for its borders of mulberry trees.) Near the house stood a coach house, dairy, feed house and bluestone stables - the stables were used in the production of a Ned Kelly film made around 1906. The grounds also accommodated a croquet green.

Before 1893 land usage at 'Rockleigh' was devoted to mixed farming; a small orchard, vineyard and grazing paddocks for cows and the carriage horses. The orchard contained olive trees, pears, quinces, loquats, apples, plums, mulberries and grapes, while oranges were grown on the slopes of Rockbeare Park, leased from Mrs Roeke. Vines grown along the banks of the creek and on the flood plain were later destroyed by Phylloxera. Maize, oats, tomatoes and peas were grown on the flood plain and were transported to market in Melbourne by horse and cart.
Cider and olive oil were produced on the property and in 1890 John Adams was awarded a prize for his oil. Until well into old age he personally tended his vines until finally handicapped by the twin misfortunes of time and gout.

The basalt boulders, which Adams used to terrace the slopes of the area, have apparently always proved too much temptation for local boys, who dislodged and rolled them down the hill, though some have withstood these ravages to the present day.

When the railway opened, boys would take the train from Collingwood to raid the fruit trees and the orchard was finally abandoned. Most of the fruit trees surviving along the creek were later cut down for firewood by local residents in the hard times of 1926-30. The area was also invaded by prickly pear. Most of the land at this time was used for dairy farming. Leased by Walter Knowles and his son, the dairy apparently once came under scrutiny by the Shire in 1922 for the low grade of its milk.

Before 1890 a large deposit of good quality bluestone suitable for road-making, concrete manufacture and ballast for railway lines, had been found on the southern end of the land and as the population increased a market close at hand was ensured for the extracted material. (The Old Heidelberg Road was metalled from this stone.) At the edge of the quarry, buildings were raised to house stone crushers. There were weatherboard stables and also a cottage occupied by Mrs Blackaby who appears to have been something of a local 'character' much renowned for her kind deeds and sense of humour. Mrs Blackaby tended the draught horses which would be left at the bottom of the quarry for weeks at a time.

The quarry machinery included a hopper with cables to lift the stone by truckloads to the top. Workmen were also carried down in trucks each morning and brought back to the surface at the end of the day. Manpower employed included a powder monkey who drilled holes for blasting operations.

As excavation was continued below a natural spring, seepage became a problem. A tunnel was dug down to the creek and automatic pumps worked constantly to keep the quarry base dry. At flood time, creek water would enter the tunnel and the sixty workmen employed by Adams would be out of work. (Eventually this tunnel was concreted over by the Northcote Council.)

The creek bank beside the quarry was once a gentle incline and a track led from the railway station to a picnic area beside the creek. The present unnaturally steep slopes are due to the dumping of unused stone from the quarry.

The quarry was in continuous operation for nearly eighty years under various members of the Adams family, mainly in partnership with others.

Thomas Adams, the son of J.S. Adams, began quarrying, and was joined in 1915 by his son P.J. Adams. Finally in 1958 the old established firm of T. Adams and Co was purchased by Albion Quarries Ltd. The quarry later became a subsidiary of Boral.

Quarrying ceased in 1965, by which time six million tons of basalt had been removed. In many places only the underlying sandstone remained. Two years later, the quarry hole was leased to the City of Northcote as a municipal garbage tip, which was filled in by September 1976. Parts of the quarry had been used as a tip from the 1920s, and the odours and rats had plagued local residents for many years.

Between 1961-65 a storage depot and engineering offices were built on the unquarried land in the south-east corner of the Darebin Parklands. When Molosky’s riding school closed, the unused part of the Albion Reid Holdings was used to graze horses.
Over the years since, Northcote Council has had the wisdom to move to preserve land along the creek for recreational purposes, and in 1975 Federal Government funding facilitated the purchase of two sections by the Council. In 1977 the State Government made an offer of a $1 - $1 grant to buy the remaining land and its purchase should be settled shortly.

The area to the south of the Parklands, which includes the Albion Reid buildings, was bought by Northcote Council in December 1978.

That a later generation has come to recognize the importance of preserving open wild areas is attested to by the determined efforts throughout the 1970s to save the Darebin Parklands. Future planning for the area envisages retention of landmarks such as Mulberry Ridge, the olive trees, and historical features like the bluestone weir, while rehabilitation and replanting will return the wild areas as near as possible to their native state.

Notes:

1. There was aboriginal settlement by the Wurungerri-Baluk tribe along the Darebin Creek. Native Tribes of S.E.Australia by A.W. Howitt.

2. The name 'Rockbeare' may have originated from a town in Devon a few miles from where the Bear family lived.

3. Age, 17 December 1863.

4. Rooke came to Melbourne soon after completing his schooling. In 1870 he probably lived in 'Wynstay' (Waverley Avenue) demolished in 1963.

5. Reserve referred to is in Wynstay Crescent running from Waverley Avenue to Abbotsford Grove.

6. Called Associated Quarries in depression of 1940.

7. The Albion Quarries Ltd. changed name to Albion Reid Pty.Ltd.

8. It was leased for a period of 20 years or until such time as the hole was filled. By mutual agreement other municipalities also used it until concern was expressed at the rapid rate the hole was filling.

9. In the same year advances were made by Northcote Council to purchase the areas of land from the Company. With Federal assistance, Northcote Council bought: (a) an area of 11.1 acres (4.7 ha) consisting of the steep and low-lying land adjacent to the Darebin Creek at the northern end of the property on 30 June 1975, and (b) an area of 17.8 acres (7.2 ha) consisting of the northern portion of the tip lease area on 31 August 1975.