

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

BRISBANE RANGES NATIONAL PARK

By Daniel Catrice, 1997

INTRODUCTION

Clues to our history are sometimes found by studying the landscape. Such is the case with the Brisbane Ranges, where history has been shaped by a distinctive environment. This article looks briefly at the history of the Brisbane Ranges and focuses on the events that led to its reservation as a national park in 1973.



GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The Brisbane Ranges are a series of low hills forming an undulating plateau bounded on the east by the Rowsley Fault Scarp, on the north by the Spring Creek Fault Scarp and on the west by the Moorabool River. This fault structure strongly influenced patterns of land use, closely differentiating timbered areas and the basaltic plains which have been cleared for agriculture. The fault structure is significant for other reasons. The exposure of auriferous beds by the Hanover Fault has resulted in the alluvial gold in the Steiglitz area. The Rowsley Fault and incised rivers have long been the subject of recreational interest at Anakie Gorge, and were one of the reasons for the reservation of the national park in 1973.

ABORIGINAL AND SQUATTERS

This ancient landscape was part of the territory of the Wathaurung tribe who occupied the land south of the Werribee River to Cape Otway.

Squatters entered this country in the early 1840s. Charles Griffith and James Moore established the "Glenmore" run in 1841. The

run comprised 55,000 acres and included parts of the northern section of the park. In 1842 Simon Staughton took up the "Brisbane Ranges" run which covered the central section of the park including Anakie Gorge. In the same year Charles von Steiglitz took up the "Durdidwarrah" run comprising 24,000 acres which he stocked with 8,000 sheep. Von Steiglitz's run included the western part of the park, from the Durdidwarrah reservoirs to Steiglitz township.

By 1843 the entire area of the national park had been claimed by squatters. However, the Brisbane Ranges were never an important grazing area. Little stock was carried due to the rugged terrain, and grazing was concentrated on the richer lands to the east of the Ranges and to the south along the Moorabool River

Grazing had a profound impact on the natural environment. The hooves of sheep and cattle compacted vegetation and soil, muddied precious watercourses and introduced and

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spread new grasses. Broadleaf succulents and Murnong roots, the vegetables of the Aboriginal people, and the tussocky and nutritious Kangaroo grass slowly disappeared. Deprived of traditional foods and decimated by European diseases, the Wathaurung populations rapidly declined. In 1863, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines estimated that the native population around the Brisbane Ranges, once 300-400, now numbered thirty.

Evidence of Aboriginal occupation can still be found in the Ranges at traditional meeting places near swamps and at quarry sites along the Moorabool River, south and south-west of the park.

GOLD SEEKERS

Gold was discovered at Steiglitz in 1853. Two years later, reef gold was discovered. Hopeful diggers rushed to the goldfield, described by one Geelong visitor as a 'romantic region of gold, quartz, avarice, toil, folly, recklessness and fraud'.

Like many goldfields in central Victoria, the Steiglitz goldfield was characterised by a series of boom and busts. During the 1860s there was a town survey, land sales, the construction of houses, schools, a court house



Kerr's Tunnel

and the formation of social clubs. The last boom occurred in the 1890s, when there were a total of 79 mining leases covering 1,000 hectares. The population peaked at 2,500 in 1893-94. Thereafter there was a steady decline. By 1897, only nine mines were working and only two, the "United

Albion" and "New Mariners", were actually producing gold. In 1904 the population was

150, and by 1907 only the "New Mariners" was able to pay a dividend.

Little remains of the township today, save for a few private buildings, two churches and the old court house which now houses an excellent museum.

FOREST MANAGEMENT

Mining devastated large areas of the Brisbane Ranges. The forests in the immediate vicinity of the mines were cleared to provide fuel for boilers and construction timber for shafts, poppet heads and mine buildings. Forests also supplied firewood for domestic and industrial uses, as well as providing timber for the Geelong-Ballarat railway.



One of the many tunnel entrances to the Paradise Mine Complex

In 1907 parts of the Brisbane Ranges were declared State forest. This area comprised the northern section of the park beyond Anakie Gorge, and the western section between the Meredith-Duridwarrah Road and the Meredith-Steiglitz Road. Managed by the State Forests Department and (from 1918) the Forests Commission of Victoria, the forest provided substantial quantities of fence posts and firewood. These operations removed most of the larger trees. Today this forest is largely coppice re-growth.

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WATER SUPPLY

In 1866, a large area comprising 1,560 hectares at the head of Stony Creek was reserved for catchment protection. The Stony Creek Dam was constructed in 1866-67 as Geelong's first water supply catchment reservoir. The eastern embankment which formed the dam was 25 metres from ground level to the crest of the embankment. At the time of construction it was one of the highest earthen embankments in the world.

The dam was designed to provide a storage capacity of 3,427 million litres. The high earthen embankment did not prove completely satisfactory. Shortly after construction the embankment sank several feet. After a serious slip in 1872 water was drained from the reservoir.

At the same time, a smaller additional storage reservoir was built at Lower Stony Creek to provide a storage capacity of 645 million litres. The water was piped to Geelong via Anakie. Miners provided the labour to dig tunnels and channels and to build dams and roads.

After the formation of the Geelong Waterworks and Sewerage Trust (now Barwon Water) in 1908, the embankment of the Upper Stony Creek Dam was restored to its original design height.

CREATION OF A PARK

The use of Brisbane Ranges as a water supply catchment was significant, as it resulted in the protection of valuable area of native vegetation. As early as 1918 the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria proposed the reserve of the Brisbane Ranges as a national park.

Cr. H.A. Boardman of the Barwon Regional Commission re-invigorated the campaign for a national park in 1956. His proposal was strongly supported by the Victorian National Parks Association and the Country Women's Association, together with prominent individuals like Professor John Turner of the University of Melbourne and J.H. Willis of the

National Herbarium. The Director of Fisheries and Wildlife lent his support to the proposal, observing that 'the reservation of the Brisbane Ranges would have significance in the conservation of our fauna, particularly koalas'.

In 1959 the National Parks Authority made three visits of inspection to the Brisbane Ranges. Negotiations with the Geelong Water and Sewerage Trust commenced in October 1959, resulting in the Trust offering large areas of its reserves as a national park. The area covered included parts of the present park



Quatre Bras Mine site building remains

south-east of the Upper Stony Creek Reservoir, bounded by Geelong-Ballan Road, Durdidwarrah Road and Manna Gum Track. As the National Parks Authority observed, this area included the 'best stands of *Grevillea chrysophea* in the Ranges. *Hibbertia*, *Hakea*, *Correa*, *Kennedy*, *Grevillea parviflora* and associated plants abound'. Also included was the Anakie Gorge, which had long been a focus of visitor interest.

In 1960 the National Parks Authority commenced discussions with the Forests Commission of Victoria. The Commission was prepared to excise approximately 1,100 acres of State forest along the Anakie Gorge Road. In the National Parks Authority's estimation, this was 'a real wildflower garden'.

At the same time, the Lands Department offered an area of vacant Crown land comprising 273 acres south of Butcher Road. This is the area of heathy woodland near

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Wildflower and Orchid Tracks. The National Parks Authority accepted the offer and asked the Lands Department to set aside the land as part of a future national park. District Surveyor, D.G. Madden, inspected these allotments and 'found many interesting specimens of native flora'. He concluded:

in view of this and that the land is subject to erosion hazard and unsuitable for settlement, I recommend that it be approved for addition to the proposed National Park

The National Parks Authority discussed the proposal to create Brisbane Ranges National Park on 4 September 1963. A recommendation was made to the Minister for State Development, the Hon. A.J. Fraser, who endorsed the proposal early in 1964.

DELAYS

Despite ministerial endorsement in 1964, it was not until 1973 that the new national park was proclaimed.

Complex land control problems were the cause of the delay. The area of permanent reserved forest could be excised by way of an exchange between the Forests Commission and the Lands Department, but as the Assistant Secretary for Lands noted: 'schedules for such exchanges are prepared from time to time - usually every year or so'. He added:

the Department does not have the staff available to give these matters any particular priority and there seems to be little chance of carrying out the above within two or three years

Differences between the gazetted reserve boundaries and those shown on Geelong Water and Sewerage Trust plans added to the problem. The southern boundary of the water supply reserve north of the Geelong-Ballan Road was marked by a fence 'erected according to ground conditions' not the gazetted boundary. Survey costs were

prohibitive. K.A. McAllister, Assistant Secretary for Lands observed that 'the whole job will be an expensive and time-consuming job and, in view of the restrictions laid down, it hardly seems warranted'.

Fortunately, the survey was completed in 1970. Survey plans were prepared in February 1971, and an area of 1,132 hectares was temporarily reserved as a site for Public Purposes (National Park) on 15 August 1973. Later that year the National Parks Advisory Committee appointed as a committee of management for Brisbane Ranges.

ADDITIONS

Over the next decade, several additions were made to the park. The Victorian Conservation Trust purchased two significant areas of freehold land: the first in 1976 comprised 47.5 hectares of freehold land forming the triangle of land at the corner of Butcher Road and Saw Pit Gully Road; the second purchase was made in 1978 and included 4 hectares adjoining Anakie Gorge Picnic Area.

The park was increased in size to 7,470 hectares on 26 April 1979 by the addition of State forest areas which form the eastern and northern sections of the present park.

The park was brought to its current size on 20 June 1995 with the inclusion of parts of the adjacent Steiglitz Historic Park.

Today Brisbane Ranges National Park is recognised for its outstanding botanical values. Almost one sixth of Victoria's plant species have been recorded in the park. It is particularly noted for its wildflowers. The park also has a rich and diverse human history. It has been carved up by land-hungry squatters, mined by gold seekers, used as a water supply catchment and cut over by timber getters. The forest is now re-generating, but visitors can still see the evidence of this history. The landscape itself provides the best and most evocative clues.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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