

# HISTORY OF BRITANNIA PARK

## ***The search for a camp house***

In 1934, when our membership in Victoria numbered 6,000, the Executive Committee decided that it was time we had a Camp House, like the Guides and Girl Scouts in other countries had. They envisaged a place where Guides and Rangers could have camps under canvas and where there would also be accommodation for them to camp indoors, should they wish it, and where Brownies could have Pack Holidays. It was decided to open a fund for this purpose, and Mrs Norman Brookes (Dame Mabel Brooks) and Mrs Euan Littlejohn were asked to begin looking for a suitable property.

The fund was started in August, 1934 with "A Guide Village". This was an exhibition and sale of handcrafts (made by the Guides) and it was held in the Melbourne Town Hall. A sum of £700 was raised and this proved a splendid start for the fund. It is nice to think that the Guides themselves contributed so much to their own camping property.

In 1934, a visit from the Founder, Lord Baden-Powell, gave great impetus to the Movement in Australia and a special stimulus to the camp fund. We were fortunate, too, in that year to have a visit from Mrs Storrow, who very generously contributed £100 to the fund. (It was Mrs Storrow, an American, who gave *Our Chalet* in Switzerland to the Guides of the world.)

Visitors to Guide House would be interested to see hanging on the wall of the Camberwell Room, a blanket made from the wool from a confederate soldier's uniform. This, too, was given by Mrs Storrow. The Camberwell Room - the main living room in Guide House - is so named because when the property was acquired by the Girl Guides Association, Camberwell District gave the money to furnish the big room.

By 1937, a sum of £3,432 had been raised. To the present generation that may not seem a large sum, but we should remember that in those years Victoria was recovering from a terrible slump and our membership numbers were small - so £3,432 was a magnificent effort. The Executive Committee decided that a sub-committee should be formed to administer this money. The Committee consisted of Mrs E Littlejohn, Miss J Boyes, Mrs F Faulkner, Miss M Russell, Mrs R Clark, Miss M Bush, Miss E Moran and Mrs E Wilson.

These ladies inspected over 70 properties in their search for the right one, and we owe a great debt of gratitude to them for their untiring efforts to find the best possible place for our Guides. Finally, in 1938, they found it. A property called 'Britannia House', belonging to a Mr and Mrs Hamer. It was situated just within the boundary of the State Forest, half-way between Yarra Junction and Warburton. It was just 45 miles from Melbourne.

## ***We become proud owners***

For the sum of £2,850 (\$5,700) we bought 16.5 acres of land, two houses (the present Guide House and Brownie Cottage), a tennis court and croquet lawn (now the two car parks), a small golf course (now the Bush, Hoffmeyer, Cameron and Barfus Campsites), a swimming pool 70ft x 40ft, a cow and a horse. The Association took possession in July 1938 and plans were made for the official opening to be performed in January 1939 by Lord Hampton who was in Australia representing the Chief. However, the appalling bushfires which raged over Victoria during that month made this impossible and the ceremony was postponed until September, 1939. Once again, fate stepped in, and this time the opening ceremony had to be cancelled altogether, for September 1939 saw the beginning of the Second World War. A large fete called 'Walkabout' had been planned to be held in the Melbourne Town Hall in that year, to raise money for the camp house, and although this project continued, the money raised £1,000 (\$2000), was given to the Red Cross and to the Guide War Work for British evacuation children.

The war years had their effort on Guide House, almost everyone was busy with war work and there was little time to take children camping. Petrol was severely rationed and, with the property so far away, few people could spare petrol for the journey. Those who had gas producers went as often as possible. We owe much to the small band of people who worked so hard to keep the property going. They held many working bees and much loving care and attention kept the houses in repair and the gardens in order. At times, there was so little money that there were doubts as to whether we would be able to retain the property. The Cottage and the House was used on occasions by the AWAS to supplement the finances and the house was occasionally let to private people. However, when the war ended, there were it still was, ready for the Brownies, Guides and Rangers to enjoy.

The founder died in Kenya in 1941 and a fund was started in Great Britain as a memorial to him. However, little could be done after the war years. At the end of the war, half the sum raised was sent to England and half was retained here. In 1954 the Baden-Powell Memorial Hut was opened at Guide House. This is known

always as B-P Hut. It was built as a wet weather recreation hut for Brownies and Guides and is also used for trainings and conferences.

In 1955, on the death of her husband, Mrs Hamer presented the Association with 10 acres of land on the south side of Guide House. This magnificent gift gave room for five more campsites and for an open-air chapel. The money for the construction of this chapel was donated by the McKay Trust. Mrs McKay was at that time Convenor of the property. Mr and Mrs Stuart McKay also gave the cabin, which is situated between Stradbroke and Hamer sites. It has proved invaluable.

Over the years, as adjacent land has become available, the Association has purchased it and we now have 42 acres. There are 18 campsites, each large enough to take a Unit camp, as well as numerous small places where Patrols can camp. Three large huts contain the equipment for the camps. Accommodation at Guide House has been increased and there are now beds for 30. Brownie Cottage can accommodate 21 people.

In 1965, it was decided that the name 'Guide House', for the property as well as for the house was too confusing. After much consideration, the name Britannia Park was chosen. This had the advantage of not only incorporating the Founder's initials, but also of using part of the original name of the property. At the same time, 'Park' aptly describes this beautiful property. The house is still called 'Guide House' and the cottage 'Brownie Cottage'.

Many large camps have been held at Britannia Park. In 1958, a State camp 'Thaba', had 700 Guides attend. This camp was virtually a practice camp for the first Guide International Camp to be held in Australia, which was held the following year, 1959, when 1,000 Guides, many from overseas, were in camp together. In 1962, the All-Australia Extension Camp was held at Britannia Park. Unfortunately, this was marred by disastrous bushfires, which, though they did not actually touch the property, were so near that the campers had to be evacuated to Melbourne. There have been many large State and international camps held at Britannia Park. Britannia Park, with its grassed campsites and its acres of natural bush, as well as its proximity to the forest and the mountains, lends itself to the accommodation of many hundreds of children. The swimming pool gives endless pleasure to the children.

A resident Warden cares for the property. We have been fortunate over the years to have so much help from members of the Movement; from Leaders, Rangers and Support Group members and also from friends of the Movement.

### ***A stroll through the gardens***

#### **The Tartandi Chapel**

The Tartandi Chapel was built in 1965 with the money given by the Leaders and Guides who attended the State camp 'Tartandi'. Mr F Ballantyne gave a great deal of time, in a voluntary capacity, to designing it and supervising its construction. The Forestry Department gave permission for granite to be taken from a small outcrop further up Britannia Creek Road, to be used for the construction of the Altar and Lectern. The timber for the seats is red pine and comes from Western Australia. The Chapel was opened in March 1965 by the then State Commissioner, Mrs J R Price. A beautiful set of Communion vessels and an altar cloth was presented by the Anglican Scout and Guide Advisory Committee.

The money to build the granite walls at the entrance to the property was the gift also from the 'Tartandi' camp, but the Brass Trefoils which adorn them were made for the first gates at Britannia Park.

#### **The Quiet Place**

The Quiet Place is there for those who wish to meet quietly, alone or in small groups. It is situated on the site of the first outdoor Chapel, which was built in 1956 and unfortunately had to be demolished some years later owing to the wind and weather having a disastrous effect on the seats and the altar. On the same site, some cedar wattles were planted and now that they are green, the Quiet Place has been made.

#### **The Swimming Pool**

The swimming pool was built by the previous owner, Mr Hamer. It was for many years overhung by trees, which, though very beautiful, allowed very little sun to filter through. There was also the constant threat of branches falling on the swimmers' blow. In recent years, many trees have been removed, the pool has been re-lined and a concrete apron made around it. As well, a 100ft. brink retaining wall has been built on the south side. The money for this work was given by the Guides and Leaders who attended the camp 'Katyrama' in 1967. The two flowering cherry trees on the lawn above the swimming pool were given by the late Mr Alex Wilkie, who gave the Committee at the time much helpful advice in the planting of the Wombalano Garden. It is of interest to note that Mr Wilkie instigated Operation Koala and the tree planting project on Phillip Island of hundreds of manna gums. This was done as a move towards the protection and conservation of koalas, and at his invitation a great number of the trees were planted by Brownies and Guides.

## *History of the campsite names in the front paddock*

### **BARFUS**

Barfus was the first site to be named and it was here that Miss Frieda Barfus and her Guide Unit - the 1st Melbourne Rangers - ran Britannia Park's first camp.

Miss Frieda Barfus known as 'Barf' or 'Yabinga' (the name conferred on her by the Rangers: an Aboriginal word meaning elder sister), first started Guiding when on the teaching staff of Toorak College, Malvern. She gained her first warrant in 1922, then later joined the staff of Victorian Guide Headquarters, where her work as a Trainer, Camp Adviser and Assistant State Secretary was invaluable.

In 1947 she volunteered for the GIS (Guide International Service) serving in Germany for a year then returned to London to assist in compiling the GIS history, *All Things Uncertain*, before being appointed as the Warden of 'Our Ark' (WAGGGS World Centre in London) a position she held for 16 years.

### **CAMERON**

Sheila Cameron formed the 2nd Hawthorn and 2nd Kew Guide Companies in 1923 and throughout her time in Guiding she held many appointments: from Guide Captain, Ranger Adviser and State Secretary, to acting State Commissioner.

Sheila Cameron avoided the limelight, never sought recognition for herself and was valued for her kindly good humour and friendliness to others, making her a trusted confidante to all who knew her.

She was the District Commissioner for Essendon from 1944-1947 and the Guide Camp at Riddles Creek has been named after her.

### **HOFFMEYER**

Mollie Hoffmeyer opened 3rd Bendigo Guide Company in 1927 and was the District Captain of Bendigo in 1930, gaining her Blue Cord Training Diploma and her camping qualifications.

For some years she wrote a column in the Victorian Guide Magazine, *Matilda*, called Bush Lore and was briefly the magazine's editor.

She brought tremendous enthusiasm to everything she undertook and her way of combining fun, learning and enjoyment to the more serious aspects of BP's Game called Guiding, impressed all who came in contact with her.

### **BUSH**

Merle Bush founded 1st Bendigo Company in 1922. She was one of the first Victorians to gain the Blue Cord for Training, the first to receive the Red Cord for service to training in other States and was the only Australian awarded the World Chief Guide's Diploma for conspicuous service rendered by someone holding the highest Training qualification. During her 59 years service to Guiding she held the positions of State Secretary, Camping Adviser, Brownie Adviser and Training Adviser and was awarded the Medal of Merit in 1931, the Red Kangaroo in 1974 and the OBE for her service to Guiding.

Those who camped with this pioneer of Victorian Guiding were inspired by the humour of her campfire tales and her talks during Guides Own.