

HEANY PARK SCOUT & GUIDE CAMP.

I have been asked to provide a synopsis of various aspects of the Heany Park Scout Camp, encompassing its history, natural resources and human usage.

History: This tract of land, of approximately 11 acres was acquired by the Shire of Ferntree Gully, possibly from Crown land, and possibly from the carve-up of the estate of James Clow, who selected most of the land between Wellington Rd and Dandenong in the mid 1850's. Its purpose was to provide a secure surround for the lake, which was constructed as part of the overall water supply for the growing city of Dandenong in the early 1920's. The lake was connected by pipeline to the South Belgrave reservoir, and from here it travelled by pipeline and aqueduct to Dandenong. The pipelines have since been rendered inactive, but one can still see evidence of the inlet and outlet valves around the lake, and visitors to nearby Churchill Park can see remnants of the old aqueducts.

When the MMBW assumed control of the water supply, the lake and its systems fell into disuse, and it is not certain as to its' uses for the period leading up to WWII.

There are several "urban myths" in circulation; one that it was used for Commando training during the war, another that it was a police firing range, and further claims that it was, for a time, a nudist colony. No evidence has been turned up supporting any of these. Certainly several local primary producers tapped into the lake (some legally, others not so) for a water supply.

From the 1950's to mid 1960's it was operated by a private concern as a recreation and swimming venue. Swimming carnivals were a regular feature, drawing crowds of thousands, and resulted in the creation of the existing toilet blocks, the two bluestone swimming pools, and a "kiosk", which is now the restored "Birubi Lodge" and represents the oldest building on the site. Remains of barbecue fireplaces still exist within the Park. There was a 5 metre diving tower in the middle of the lake. It was an extremely popular picnic spot for many years, and I would like a dollar for every person who has said to me "I used to come here when I was a kid!".

Its popularity declined, and the Park suffered from neglect, becoming a pest-infested tract of land for many years, until offered to the Knox District Scouts as a campsite in 1986, finally leased jointly to the Scouts and Guides in 1988 on a nine year lease. The Guides have never shown much interest in the Park, other than for an access pint to their campsite on the northern boundary. On renewal of the lease, the Scout

Association became the sole lessee. Local Scouting communities have been responsible for the restoration of the Park to its present state, with the eradication of weeds its prime focus.

Natural History. The Park has been declared an area of local natural significance. It sits squarely on the intersection of two bioregions – the Gippsland Plains region and the Dandenongs region. Accordingly a cross section of the vegetation types of both regions can be found in the Park. Eight plant species of regional significance have been found in the Park, and the preservation as a natural reserve, at least above the lake, has been strongly recommended (ref Mark McWha Landscape Architect, 2001) A considerable number of other plant species exist, including a number of non-indigenous “pest” species – *pinus radiata* and Sweet Pittosporum trees, and a number of understorey plants, including blackberry and gorse (pretty well under control) and the super-invasive Boneseed.

Forest represents a number of eucalypt species, essentially Yellow Box and the understorey is open with a variety of native shrubs in evidence.

Geologically, the area is similar to the rest of the Lysterfield Hills, with vast deposits of dacite (currently being quarried nearby) supporting a heavy clay subsoil, and a thin topsoil, as would be expected on hillsides of such steepness.

Animal life is considerable, but perhaps not so diverse with the encroachment of human habitat. Large numbers of small and large lizards can be found in the summer, and black, tiger, copperhead and brown snakes have all been observed in the Park.

The wetland areas contain many species of frog, although a formal study of these has not been undertaken. The lake contains tortoises, a population of redfin, possibly some trout and yellowbelly from stocking in the early 1990’s and one big carp. Insect populations are huge; unfortunately mostly mosquitos. A population of eastern grey kangaroos uses the Park regularly, there are three known species of possum (including the comparatively rare Sugar Glider), bats have been observed, echidnas, and a recent report from a neighbour suggests that wombats are around. Pest species include rabbits, foxes and feral cats.

Bird life has been considerable in the past. The Park’s bird-list is attached, naming some 60 positive identifications. Many of these have not been seen for many years, again due to suburban encroachment, but it is still a significant list. The lake ensures that itinerant water birds of many types could be seen as they pass through.

Usage. Basically the City of Knox Scout District has controlled the legal use of the Park over the past 17 years. Accordingly, most usage has been by the youth members of the Scout Association in the pursuit of scouting activities. The lake has proved valuable as a canoe training venue, and a number of cleared campsites exist. Other groups are permitted to use the Park by the Camp Warden and over the years these have included other youth groups, orienteering groups, adult “executive training” groups. Of recent times a local Mountain Bike Club has used the park for events during daylight saving months. The Knox Environment Society maintains an interest in the Park, and has been responsible for a number of initiatives over the years. Some ten years ago the Scouts erected a hall on the property, which now comprises the Scout Hall for one of the District’s Groups.

Unauthorised usage remains the Park’s largest problem. Vandalism, trespass and theft have been significant issues from day one, and the Park’s infrastructure has suffered considerably, both in damage and expense, from human predation.

Overall, however, Heany Park remains as a natural jewel in the midst of rapidly expanding suburbia. I hope it is permitted to remain that way.

John Ford

(Immediate past Camp Warden)