



Agricultural History of the Darebin Parklands

Very few remnants of Melbourne's early agricultural history are as easy to explore as those within the Darebin Parklands in Alphington and Ivanhoe. The olive and other fruit trees within the park are more than a century old and remnants of weirs used to dam the Darebin Creek can be found.

Throughout the inner Melbourne area there aren't too many clues about its sources of food in the early years. European style agriculture in the Darebin Creek Valley would have been a large source of food for Melbourne residents during the 1800s and early 1900s. Remnant sites such as Darebin Parklands need to be acknowledged and conserved in future years as a continual reminder of our past, and as recognition of the need for a city, as modern as Melbourne, to consider the source of its food.

The Government surveyor Hoddle investigated the Darebin Creek area in 1837, declaring land to the east of the creek Keelbundoora, currently Banyule City Council, and to the west Jika Jika, currently Darebin City Council. These names both derive from local Aboriginal names. The two sides of the creek were developed separately as Government orders prevented land grants on both sides of a watercourse.

Keelbundoora

There were only scattered sheep runs about the area until a speculator named Thomas Walker purchased land within Keelbundoora at the first sales of Victorian lands in Sydney, September 1838. Later, in 1857, the third owner of the property, Thomas Hutchins Bear, constructed the bluestone house named "Rockbeare" on Darebin Hill. This building remains in full glory in Rocke Street, Ivanhoe.

Bear began cropping on the lower floodplains and adjacent hill slopes with viticulture and orchards. It is thought that during this time the bluestone weirs, which are still in place, were constructed to dam the Darebin Creek. The water was then redirected toward the floodplain and steep slopes to irrigate the crops. By 1880 Bear had leased the agricultural lands to William Henry Rocke and neighboring Chinese market gardeners, producing ginger and vegetables. Heidelberg Shire records show the latter tenants obtained a license to apply "night soil" as fertilizer. Subdivision of the Rockbeare Estate began in 1888, it was planned to coincide with the opening of the rail line (known presently as the Hurstbridge line). The second stage of subdivisions was in 1911. The floodplains and steep slopes within the present

boundaries of the Darebin Parklands were to become known as Rockbeare Park, which was purchased by Heidelberg Council in 1929 from Herman Groth.

During the early 1900s Rockbeare Park was popular and highly utilized by local residents. Sunday School picnics, Scout groups, sporting organizations, landscape painters, leech collectors, and people foraging for fruits, yabbies and fish all frequently ensuring the hills and creek surrounds were abuzz with activity. As time passed Rockbeare Park became neglected, the locals were absent as was their noise and activity. Between 1940 and 1974 the park became less popular, providing a peaceful home to the grazing horses of McLosky's riding school.

Jika Jika

The Jika Jika side of the Darebin Creek had various owners from 1840 onwards, but it was not until John Sharp Adams purchased and combined lands from Thomas Wills and Henry Morgan in 1880, that the land on both sides of the Darebin became extensively farmed. Adams, and his family, held tenure over the Jika Jika lands for over eighty years, during which time the land was concomitantly used for quarrying and pastoral-agricultural activities. The elm lined drive, which began at the railway near Alphington Station, extended to their house "Rockleigh", and then continued beyond the house where a further avenue lined with Chinese Black Mulberries (of which some remain) led down to the floodplain.

Until the early 1890s land usage at Rockleigh was devoted to mixed farming; a small orchard containing olives, pears, quinces, locquats, apples, plums, mulberries and grapes, a vineyard and pasture for cows and carriage horses. Maize, oats, tomatoes and peas were grown on the floodplain. These were transported to market in Melbourne by horse and cart. Cuttings and seedlings were supplied to other agricultural areas, especially fruit trees to farms in the north. Cider and olive oil were produced on the property, and in 1890, John Adams was awarded a prize for his olive oil.



Grazing cattle along the Darebin Creek Valley



Quarry hole before being filled by local refuse

Sometime in the early-mid 1890s the Adams family began exploiting the wealth beneath the ground, quarrying and crushing basalt (bluestone) *in situ*. As time passed the works became more extensive. Dust clouds and explosions provided constant annoyance to locals, who petitioned council to put an end to the quarrying. In 1957 Albion Quarries Ltd (a Boral subsidiary) took over, continuing until 1965, by which time 600 million tonnes of rock had been removed, in places down to such enormous depths that the underlying sandstone was revealed.

The huge hole was leased two years later to the Northcote Council as a municipal garbage tip (older areas of the quarry had been used as waste disposal areas, encouraging a healthy rat population). It was filled by September 1975, a period of only eight years. North of the tip site there were lands that remained unaffected by heavy industry, but were used as pastoral land and for agriculture.

Modern Park Management

The Rockbeare Conservation Group formed in May 1973, enacting many ambitious plans to restore past glory and retrieve the park from the weeds. These pioneering “environmentalists” toiled long and hard volunteering countless hours. Still active today as the Darebin Parklands Association, we thank them for their hard work and foresight, as they successfully campaigned to have the two sides of the creek amalgamated to form Darebin Parklands.

Along with the resilient olive trees lie dozens of other fruit trees that have stood the test of time within the Darebin Creek valley. Though not native to the area, they have been managed and protected by workers and volunteers during recent times, as they are deemed to be of regional historical significance.

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