**Article for Planning Institute News**

(Editor Bill Chandler)

The site of Westgate Park – that urban forestyou see going over Westgate Bridge - has a very chequered history, characterised by exploitation, degradation and neglect and, until recently, not a lot of planning.

A small group of determined citizens (including retired planner and former Lord Mayor, Lecki Ord) have worked for two decades rehabilitating this 40ha. park, planting it out with 320 species of indigenous vegetation and now it truly is an *environmental gem* befitting its spot in the heart of Melbourne*.*

*Life on the Bend* - a social history of Fishermans Bend, July 2017, says the land was once:

*…a place to some extent cut off from the rest of Melbourne, and characterised by a landscape that was sandy, watery and scrubby, and not particularly favourable in the eyes of British settlers*.

It was also prone to flooding, as could be expected of a river delta, but full of life, especially birds, and once an important Aboriginal hunting ground.

Unlike Emerald Hill and Sandridge which were subdivided in the 1850s, the area that became Westgate Park was considered unsuitable for housing and held reserve for future port use by the Melbourne Harbour Trust.

Thus began a kind of no-man’s-land approach to Fishermans Bend. Indeed Aboriginal people continued to camp in and pass through the area for another decade before being forced off to missions.

Marine sand deposits up to 10 meters deep that had been built up over thousands of years across Port Melbourne were soon quarried for construction, glass-making and ballast and by the mid 20thC the area had been levelled. (Westgate Park’s saltwater lake was a deep sand mine, probably connected underground to Port Phillip Bay.)

Fisherfolk lived for years in shacks along the beach and the Yarra River in amongst remnants of natural vegetation, mostly Tea-tree. Over time spoil from river deepening was dumped there, vegetation was cut down for fuel and the area became a wasteland, albeit a peaceful one, according to *The* *Argus* in 1884:

‘At a distance of only a mile and a half from the heart of this great metropolis one can wander about on a Saturday perfectly alone and amidst the most profound silence.’

Intensive industrialisation of Fishermans Bend took off in the war years with car, aircraft and associated industries. By the 1960s industry was producing toxic, smelly waste. Burning landfill waste sent smoke along Williamstown Road, enveloping those crossing the river by ferry. In the Westgate Park area, horse and car racing and an aircraft runway produced plenty of noise and largely destroyed any remnant nature.

A decade later the area that was to become Westgate Park was the site for Westgate Bridge construction, completed after ten years in 1978.

Oscar Meyer, Chair of the West Gate Bridge Authority said he wanted to create ‘a beautiful park straddling the Yarra River to complement his sculptural bridge’.

In 1979, *The Age* described the land seen from the newly opened bridge as ‘scrofulous scenery indeed  … dead water, swamp, sick factories, dead wood, haze, gasping barges, wretched refineries, wheezing chimneys, dead grass, institutional putrification.

Four years later the new ALP government established the Lower Yarra Development Committee which developed plans for the site as an undulating landscape, delivering on Oscar Meyer’s vision although not (yet) straddling the River. The Federal Government funded the project to mark Victoria’s sesquicentenary in 1984-85.

A narrow gauge railway was envisaged with bridges between hills. A sound shell, sculptures and a visitor centre were planned for the freshwater lake island.

In 1984 work started. Vast quantities of rubble and assorted soil were trucked in from around Melbourne. Tipping fees helped fund the work.

A third of the site was formed into lakes, mostly shallow but, as these were not fed by natural watercourses, water levels dropped over time and water quality became poor.

There was insufficient money to build scenic railways or other attractions and the Park was planted out with Australian flora, mostly from WA.

Race Matthews opened the Park in November 1985 dedicated it to the people of Victoria and it was handed over to the MMBW, Parks Division for incorporation into the Metropolitan Park system.

However, despite its plum location on the banks of the River, easy access from the new bridge and a stone’s throw from the CBD and the foreshore, the Park was somewhat isolated from its nearest residential community by Port traffic and the very bridge that gave rise to it.

Garden beds became weedy and were eventually mown. Non-indigenous Bulokes and Melaleucas, took hold, forming dense copses. Rabbits and foxes thrived.

The steep slopes attracted mountain bike riders who carved tracks throughout the Park. Tonnes of unwanted material was dumped there like old pier timbers from a nearby yard. In the early 1990s the section east of Todd Road was carved off for go-kart racing.

All in all, Westgate Park in the 1990s was not an attractive place to be.

In 1999, 19 year-old **Naomie Sunner**, a photography student, discovered the Park at the end of her transformative trek along the length of the Yarra River. She thought this neglected park – the closest she could get to the river mouth – was nonetheless beautiful and had **such potential**! She established the Friends of Westgate Park and set to work.

“The sheer size was daunting but this land had been so disturbed that nothing I could do would make it worse. There were some areas with remnant salt marsh but wasn’t the same as walking into a real remnant site. There were maybe 10 planted species, a few of them indigenous but lots of invasives like Juncus acutus.”

“I knew very little about revegetation at the time but volunteered at SKINC (local indigenous nursery), read an awful lot and identified plants by drawing. I call myself nag-taught – taught by nagging other people for info.”

She organised planting days with ‘varying success’, took on school groups, learned to make grant applications and ran a work for the dole program but it wasn’t until a new member, turned up, sharing her enthusiasm, that the group made progress on creating a rich, biodiverse park.

**George Fotheringham**, a retired landscape contractor and natural landscape designer, still works more than full time, leading the on-ground effort. **Tony Flude**, an experienced organiser, joined and built a stable of corporations and groups keen to put in a day’s work. Others came and over time a solid core of volunteers formed. They successfully advocated for 7.8ha. of adjacent land to be added to the Park and undertook major landscaping projects on these.

**Based on soil type and climatic exposure, the Park was mapped into nine natural communities of plant species (totalling 320) in different combinations, as recognised by the Victorian Environmental Vegetation Classes, eg. Plains Grassy Woodland like the Botanical Gardens and Coast Banksia Woodland on exposed river reaches. Remnant Saltmarsh areas were protected and expanded.**

**(photo of EVC map here)**

**300,000 indigenous plants have so far been put in the ground.** Rare and endangered species have been propagated and nurtured and the Park is a productive seed bank.

Hundreds of species of fauna and fungiare now resident or visit periodically - 160 birds species, 70 species of fungi, 100+ insects (undoubtedly many more to be discovered), frogs, tiger snakes, blue-tongue lizards, long-neck turtles, micro bats, flying foxes and the ring and brush-tail possums.

A food chain is evident with decomposers, primary producers (plants), herbivores, omnivores, and predators large and small and *it’s beginning to look a lot like biodiversity*!

In June 2018 the Friends of Westgate Park amalgamated with long-time partners and the only other producers of locally indigenous plants - St Kilda Indigenous Nursery Cooperative to form Westgate Biodiversity: Bili Nursery & Landcare.

The plan is for Bili Nursery to move from its site in Williamstown Road – earmarked for public open space in Fishermans Bend Urban Renewal planning – to land newly incorporated into the Park at the end of Wharf Road.

Here a new combined compound, larger nursery and community space is planned where citizen science workshops can be run and a steady stream of volunteers can finish the remaining few years of revegetation work in the Park. Maintenance and plant replacement will continue but resources will be freed up to extend the nursery’s reach beyond the local area to the whole of the Sand Belt region and across the river to the Western Plains.

Our advocacy will inevitably turn to promoting indigenous vegetation to councils and residents. Cities can and should play a role in protecting and enhancing biodiversity but indigenous planting is where it must start.

Thanks to local Banksias, Eucalypts, Melaleucas and Callistemons planted years ago, Port Melbourne has become good habitat for the Grey-headed Flying Fox – a largely nectar-feeding and especially handsome bat that pollinates vast areas of forest in the Great Dividing Ranges of the eastern states. Its numbers are dwindling as habitat is lost and it is now listed as endangered. Plane trees are of little use to them.

More councils, community groups and households could increase biodiversity by infilling under-utilised parts of parks, nature strips, edges of football ovals, train and tram reserves, creek banks and private gardens with variety in both plant species and forms so these become more complex and more natural ecosystems rather than "grass and trees".

Park users would see more interesting birds, butterflies and bees, less lawn would require mowing and the planet also benefits.

See our website for the huge range of wildflowers once prolific in Melbourne, photos of the towering River Red Gums, the iconic Golden Wattle and much more….

And, to see for yourself the little bit of Australian bush a few kilometres from the CBD, hop on a bus at Vic Market or take the Todd Road exit from the bridge.

We’ll see you there!

Lyn Allison

Westgate Biodiversity: Bili Nursery & Landcare

[www.westgatebiodiversity.org.au](http://www.westgatebiodiversity.org.au)