HENLEY ON MARIBYRNONG TERRACES

Location
THE BOULEVARD MOONEE PONDS, Moonee Valley City

Municipality
MOONEE VALLEY CITY

Level of significance
Delisted Heritage Inventory site

Heritage Inventory (HI) Number
D7822-0525

Heritage Listing
History

Contextual History

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was growing appreciation by Victorians of the natural environment for recreational purposes (Dingle, 1983 p145). This was a period also when progress associations were formed in many Victorian locations to promote and improve open space and amenities, both for local residents and to attract visitors and tourists. Recreational boating was a popular pastime for many Victorian residents. (Barnard, 2008, p.62).

Essendon River League

Essendon's population grew during the landboom years of the 1880s and again during the first decade of the twentieth century, when it was one of Melbourne's fastest growing suburbs. It was during this decade that Essendon became a city. Wedged between the industrial suburbs of Brunswick to the east and Footscray across the Saltwater River to the west, Essendon's development was primarily residential and it was promoted as an 'eden' amongst the industrialized region that surrounded it. Early in 1906 the Mayor of Essendon, Cr J.D. Downing suggested the formation of an Essendon River League to 'protect, improve and beautify' the Saltwater River and the 'adjoining locality' (History of Essendon, 1948, p. 165). The Saltwater formed the south west boundary of the municipality of Essendon. Decades of pollution by noxious industries located on the banks of the Saltwater River at Kensington, Footscray and Braybrook had degraded the quality of the river and its name had become synonymous with 'stinks' in the minds of Melbourne's public (Lack, 1985, p.190) Much of the land bordering the river had been alienated from the crown in the nineteenth century. Box thorn and thistle abounded and the slopes surrounding the river had been largely denuded of natural vegetation. The Yarra Improvement Act 1896 had enabled the Board of Land and Works to straighten the Yarra River's course between Princes Bridge and Church Street and lay out the Alexandra Gardens in the 1890s. (Priestley, p. 231). Cr J.D. Downing, in suggesting the formation of a river league in Essendon, felt that it time that the Saltwater River received similar improvement (History of Essendon, 1948, p. 165)

The Essendon River League was formally constituted at a meeting held at the Essendon Town Hall in May 1906. Membership of the league was open to anyone who paid the one shilling annual subscription. However, it was closely aligned with the Essendon Council. The Mayor of Essendon served as President of the League and Essendon's Curator, John Oliver, became the League's Honorary Curator (Kenny, p. 13). Though it was based in Essendon, the league's plans for the beautification of the river initially extended beyond the municipality. Members of the league hoped to have the river renamed, for instance, though it was not until 1913 that the river was formally renamed the Maribyrnong. The League's first arbor day, held in November 1906, focused on the Braybrook side of the river where the Premier, Thomas Bent, had reserved a riverside boulevard out of the Maribyrnong estate. Thistle and boxthorn were cut back and 750 sugar gum trees planted on either side of the boulevard (Kenny p.17). Members of the league continued to lobby public health authorities to take action to prevent pollution of the river.

The formation of the Essendon River League took place in an era when Victorians increasingly used public transport to access recreation (Dingle p. 149) In 1906 the opening of the North Melbourne Electric Light and Tramways Company completed a tramline from Melbourne to a terminus near the bridge across the Saltwater...
River between Moonee Ponds to Maribyrnong. The Tramways Company welcomed the idea of improving the river and its environs and offered financial assistance to do so. 'It would 'pay the company to make the river attractive' as this would entice more passengers to use the new service (History of Essendon, 1948, p-167). The River League's first tree - an oak- was ceremonially planted on the roadway near the tram terminus on 25 August 1906 and soon after the Essendon Council purchased six and a half acres of riverside land near the tram terminus to serve as a reserve. This was the first of several riverfront parks that the Essendon Council would acquire over the next two decades. Soon after the reserve was purchased, a motor boat service began offering pleasure cruises along the Saltwater from a private jetty on the opposite (Braybrook) side of the river from the tram terminus. Five years later Daniel Hicks opened the Riverview Tea Gardens upstream at (present day) Avondale Heights. Passengers alighting from the tram were ferried to the Tea Gardens from the tram terminus.

Aquatic Sports

Competitive rowing regattas had taken place on both the Saltwater and Yarra Rivers and on the Barwon River in Geelong since the mid nineteenth century. From the 1860s to the 1940s, competition between public schools, which became known as the Head of the River competition took place on the Yarra near Hawthorn, while regattas staged on the Saltwater River, such as the Clarke Challenge Cup, were staged downstream of Essendon, between Newport and Footscray. In 1903, after the improvement of the Yarra River and creation of the Alexandra Gardens, an annual Henley regatta was inaugurated on the Yarra River. The popularity of the Henley on Yarra was such that, in the 1920s, there were as many as 200,000 spectators for the event (Priestley, p. 231). Swimming, rather than simply bathing, became more popular with Victorians at the turn of the twentieth century. River swimming holes became popular and many Victorians began to regard swimming as a sport (Priestley, p. 230). The Victorian Amateur Swimming Association was formed in 1893 (Priestley p. 230) . The Essendon River League affiliated with this association in 1913. Four years later the Essendon Swimming Club affiliated (McDonald, 1993).

River Improvement

Although the Essendon Council and Essendon River League achieved some improvements on the Maribyrnong River and in Maribyrnong Park prior to the 1920s, major improvements to the Maribyrnong River and its environs, including the construction of the Henley on Maribyrnong terraces , were only achieved after control of both the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers (upstream from that area controlled by the Melbourne Harbor Trust) passed to the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works after the passing of the Metropolitan Drainage and Rivers Act, 1923. The act was mainly aimed at enabling the MMBW to implement flood control and mitigation works on metropolitan rivers and streams (Dingle and Rasmussen p. 154) The Board began work on both rivers in 1924. In late 1927 the board approved the spending of £15,000 per annum for the next three years to be spent on improving the Maribyrnong River between Avondale Heights and Footscray. The work included removing snags, rocks, reefs and piles from the river, sloping and beaching the banks with bluestone and beautification of the banks. Trees were planted along the banks as well as in riverside parks already reserved by the Essendon Council. The Henley on Maribyrnong grandstand was built in the context of this work.

The improvements to the river in the 1920s and 1930s mirrored a general movement in Victoria at this time to improve and beautify natural assets for the enjoyment of the public, as well as to protect natural assets. Often this work was carried out with funding provided for unemployment relief. Many bayside municipalities instituted foreshore protection plans during the 1930s. At Geelong unemployment relief funding helped to create the Eastern Beach complex. In Melbourne, from Brighton to Beaumaris, sea walling, rock cladding of cliffs and ramps and retaining walls were built by the Public Works Department during the 1930s, using unemployment relief funds. While these improvements were partially aimed at protecting foreshores and beaches from erosion, they were also seen as improving the amenity of beaches and reserves for the Victorian population to enjoy (Age, 21 October, 1930).

History of Place

The Henley on Maribyrnong grandstand was the product of efforts by the Essendon River League and the Essendon Council to beautify the Maribyrnong River and its environs. But it was a product of the responsibility given to the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works for this river in 1923. The increasing use of the Maribyrnong River in this vicinity for aquatic sports was also a factor in the construction of the grandstand.

On 15 May 1906 at a public meeting in Essendon, the Essendon River League was formed. The members of the league aimed to beautify and improve the Saltwater (Maribyrnong) River, which formed the south western boundary of the municipality and to make the river and its environs an ‘attractive pleasure ground’ (Essendon Gazette, 23 March 1906). The formation of the league coincided with the opening of a tram line from Melbourne to Moonee Ponds, terminating at the bridge that spanned the river between Maribyrnong Road and Raleigh's
May, 1932, scale' than he had used to design terraces at the southern end of the park. (terraces, while the Essendon City Surveyor credited the MMBW with the decision to terrace the cliff 'on a bolder
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Public Works Committee Minutes, 11/11/1929, VPRS 7916/p/1, unit 3).
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Melbourne Harbor Trust). Soon after the act was passed the MMBW began work on both the Yarra and
Metropolitan Board of Works responsible for the Maribyrnong River (outside of the area covered by the
2003 and
summerton,1907). The Essendon Council purchased six and a half acres of land fronting the river and adjacent to the tram
terminus and Maribyrnong Road bridge in September 1906. One councillor judged it to be the 'best site on the
riverbank for public recreation' and 'when improved' it would add to the attractiveness of the river' (Summerton,
2003 and Essendon Gazette, 23 May 1906). Initially called the Ascot Vale Reserve, it was later named
Maribyrnong Park. The 'fine high block of land' purchased by the Council included two steep clay cliffs facing the
river, separated by a valley. The Henley Grandstand would eventually replace the steeper of these cliffs at the
north end of the park.
From 1912 the river league raised funds for its projects by staging an annual water carnival, known as the
Henley on Maribyrnong. The Henley featured aquatic sports, such as rowing, canoeing, swimming and novelty
events and attracted competitors from a number of aquatic clubs from Melbourne and beyond. Besides the
activity on the river, fairground attractions, such as merry-go-rounds and refreshment tents located in
Maribyrnong Park bolstered the receipts from the Henley carnivals. The first water carnival attracted a crowd of
between 20,000 and 30,000 (Kenny p. 32) and the event became a fixture on the Essendon social calendar,
though it was suspended during some years of both world wars. From 1913, some of the spectators at the
Henley event could view the competition as invited guests on 'houseboats', temporary structures moored at the
river bank on barges. Local clubs, such as the North Suburban Club or the Essendon Fish Protection Society
sponsored individual houseboats.

The river league played an active part in improving Maribyrnong Park, planting trees and, in 1921, constructing a
band rotunda with voluntary labour. From the early 1920s it drew the attention of the Essendon Council to the
dangerous state of the cliff at the north end of the park. In 1922 as City Councillors spent a day travelling around
Essendon to 'beat the bounds', the City Engineer, W. Murray Pullar, unveiled a plan to construct a series of
terraces in the park facing the river (Essendon Gazette, 2 February1922). It was agreed on this day that the park
would be generally cleaned up and pathways terraced. One councillor suggested that a 'substantial jetty' should
be built at a convenient location in the park. It was also suggested that the river should be straightened so that a
mile-long rowing course could be offered to competitors at the annual Henley event.

In 1927, with funds received through the Public Works Department to employ unemployed workers, the
Essendon Council began regrading the smaller of the two park cliffs, that at the southern end of the park, using
Pullar's design. The cliff was excavated and graded, stone steps were constructed and the slopes were planted.
A path was constructed on the upper level of the slopes. (VPRS 7916, p 1, Unit 1, Minutes Essendon Council
Public Works Committee). In the same year the River League began discussing the difficulty and expense the
organisers of Henley on Maribyrnong were facing in acquiring barges for the houseboats used by spectators at the
annual event. Mr Pullar, along with other members of the league, suggested that a solution to the problem
might be to build a 'promenade' beside the river close to the high water mark. Temporary houseboats could be
erected on the promenade, while a wharf would also serve as a permanent mooring place for small craft. Pullar
designed the wharf and oversaw its construction. But the £600 cost was shared between the River League, the
Essendon Council and the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (Essendon City Council Minutes of
Finance Committee, 27 October 1930, VPRS 7916, P/1, Vol 33). Work on the promenade and wharf began in
1930 and continued into 1931.

The Metropolitan Drainage and Rivers Act passed by the Victorian Parliament in 1923 made the Melbourne and
Metropolitan Board of Works responsible for the Maribyrnong River (outside of the area covered by the
Melbourne Harbor Trust). Soon after the act was passed the MMBW began work on both the Yarra and
Maribyrnong, dredging, de-snagging and widening and beaching the banks (Dingle and Rasmussen, p. 154). It
was in this context that the MMBW agreed to share in the cost of the Henley promenade, as the 300 foot (91.2
metres) long wharf would stand in place of beaching along the length of the promenade (Essendon City Council
Public Works Committee Minutes, 11/11/1929, VPRS 7916/p/1, unit 3).

Although there is evidence of the agreement between the MMBW and the Essendon Council to share the cost of
the promenade and wharf, no evidence has been found of correspondence regarding the construction of the
Henley terraces. The Essendon River League had argued for some time that something should be done about
the 'dangerous and unsightly cliff' at the Holmes Road end of Maribyrnong Park, which had been fenced off by
the Essendon Council. Several sources clearly indicate that the MMBW was responsible for building the
terraces, while the Essendon City Surveyor credited the MMBW with the decision to terrace the cliff 'on a bolder
scale' than he had used to design terraces at the southern end of the park. (The Commonwealth Engineer, 2
May, 1932, Essendon Gazette, 11 February, 1932, Essendon Council Public Works Committee Minutes, 14
September, 1931). Employees of the MMBW, who had been working since 1928 on Maribyrnong River improvements, 'regarded the cliff'. Twenty-two thousand cubic yards of earth was removed ([Essendon Gazette, 11 February 1932]). The cliff was replaced by an open air grandstand of seven tapering terraces, with bluestone faced benches ([The Commonwealth Engineer, 4 May 1932]). The lowest terrace - 750 feet (228 metres) in length - faced the new promenade. The grandstand offered an 'uninterrupted view of the Henley racing' ([Essendon Gazette, 4 February 1932]). It was completed in time for spectators at the 1932 Henley on Maribyrnong to take advantage of its grass-carpeted slopes ([Essendon Gazette, 11 February 1932]). The MMBW employed 'day labour' to work on the improvements to the Maribyrnong River, suggesting that this work offered employment to unemployed workers during the Depression, although there is no evidence available to suggest that unemployment relief funds were accessed to subsidise the work (MMBW Minutes, 1930-33).

The year after the completion of the grandstand, the Essendon Ladies Rowing Club, which had been formed in 1923, opened new clubrooms near the terraces on the boulevard in Maribyrnong Park. The following year the Essendon Anglers' Club, which dated back to 1903, opened their new clubrooms alongside.

The River League continued to actively promote the Henley on Maribyrnong carnival until 1965, when the event was reportedly attended only by 'a few rowing enthusiasts and a few small boys on bicycles' (Kenny, p. 50) In 1973 the Essendon Rowing Club revived the Henley on Maribyrnong as an annual sprint event (ERC minutes). The Henley Grandstand continues to be used by spectators at this event.

Description

The Henley on Maribyrnong terraces are a series of seven grassed terraces, faced with bluestone and bordered with concrete. The base terrace, facing a shared pathway along the Maribyrnong River in Maribyrnong Park, is approximately 230 metres long. Succeeding terraces diminish in length. Each terrace is approximately one metre in height. The terraces are intersected with two sets of stairs and handrailing, which appear to have been added since the terraces were constructed in the 1930s.

Comparisons

Terraced seating or steps were built in conjunction with a number of inland swimming pools in the 1920s-1930s. The Hepburn Springs (H1865) swimming pool formed by constructing a concrete weir across a portion of Spring Creek, incorporated terraces into the surrounding landscape. Calembeen Park in Creswick (H0398), which was developed between 1910 and 1950, incorporated concrete seating as part of the facilities, though this seating has since been removed. Fairfield swimming pool, constructed by the Heidelberg Council on the Yarra River in 1925, also incorporated terraced seating.

Sources

The Commonwealth Engineer, 2 May, 1932
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Tony Dingle, The Victorians, Settling
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Helen Doyle ‘Organising Recreation' An Historical Survey of Recreational Patterns in Victoria', Department of Natural Resources and Environment, April, 1999

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*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place data owner.*

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