

# MEMORIES OF COOKS RIVER

William L. Howard 2008

# CONTENTS

## MEMORIES OF COOKS RIVER

1. INTRODUCTION .....	2
2. THE RIVER BEFORE MY TIME.....	4
3. THE RIVER AS I REMEMBER IT .....	7
4. NUMBER 19.....	10
5. WILDLIFE AND THE RIVER.....	14
6. PEOPLE AND THE RIVER.....	17
7. PEOPLE AND THE RIVER FLATS .....	24
8. THE ALTERATIONS TO THE RIVER .....	31

## 1. INTRODUCTION

My family home was at no. 19 Permanent Avenue, Earlwood which before alterations were made to Cooks River, had its rear boundary at the high water mark of the river. The river was therefore very accessible to me and during my childhood and early adolescence, most of my activities were associated with it.

What follows are my memories of the Earlwood-Undercliffe stretch of the river, a little either side of the 1940s. I have not however limited myself to this focus and where I have felt there was an item of interest outside these boundaries, I have included it.

In the course of 60 or more years, memories can fade and in any case, events seen through the eyes of a child may differ from an adult's perception of the same events. Hence some of the rationale behind the events I describe may not be correct but I have chosen not to attempt to verify the accuracy of what I say because my intention is to give a personal account not an historical one.

I have not had any significant contact with the river for something like 50 years. Many of the aspects for the river I describe will be unchanged but I don't know which, so I have used the past tense throughout.

It has been suggested I should include a map of the places I describe but when I attempted to do so, it covered several pages of a street directory and became too complex. Instead I have given a descriptive location of places so they can be more readily found by reference to a street directory.

I have taken as a starting point, things I was told about the river. These, while not part of my personal memories, influenced the way I thought about the river and explain why some of the things I do remember were as they were.

## 2. THE RIVER BEFORE MY TIME

My mother's family home was in Riverside Crescent, Dulwich Hill near its junction with Ewart Street. From this junction, Riverside Crescent runs downhill towards Cooks River and from the front of her home my mother had a panoramic view of the stretch of the river running between what is now Ewen Park in the suburb of Hurlstone Park and the land which was to become the northern part of Earlwood.

I recall her saying that in her childhood, which was pre World War I, the river was "very pretty". For the most part, there was a clearly defined boundary between the river and the dry land. She also said that the land away from the river flats on the Earlwood side was "all bush".

There were very few places where access to dry land from the river was impeded by rushes and/or reeds and the river was a popular place for weekend boating picnics. The river banks were lined with casuarina trees (river oaks) which undoubtedly prevented the erosion of the river banks and created the clear boundary between land and water.

There were also remnant copses of casuarinas on Ewen Park. I suspect at one time the whole area was a casuarina forest. In the early days of settlement in the Sydney area, huts were roofed with bark but cottages were roofed with shingles and these were usually obtained from casuarina trees because their timber splits so easily. The demand for shingles and for firewood had, I think, led to the once-forested river flats being partially cleared.

The river flats were also cleared for agricultural purposes. In my mother's childhood there were farms on what are now the Wills

Sportsground and Beaman Park (on either side of the Wardell Bridge on the Earlwood side). This area was then known as Nobbs Flat, named for an early settler. As a child, my mother accompanied her mother on weekly shopping visits to these farms to purchase fruit and vegetables and other farm produce.

To cross the river, they used the original Wardell Road Bridge which was a suspension bridge. This swayed from side to side in any sort of wind and rattled alarmingly whenever a vehicle used it. My mother's two most vivid memories of these visits were the terror of walking over the bridge and the delight of a glass of warm milk taken straight from a cow.

Today, in Hutton Street, Hurlstone Park there is a block of home units. In my childhood these were Hutton's Bacon Factory, and earlier a Sugar Mill. My mother told me that steam launches towed barges laden with sugar cane up the river to this mill. I initially thought this was a personal memory but subsequently found out the sugar mill had ceased to operate in 1855, so the story of the barges was something she had been told, rather than something she had seen. The most likely source of the story was her stepmother.

My grandmother died at the relatively young age of 41, and my grandfather subsequently remarried. His second wife was a descendant of John Parkes, the first settler in Earlwood. She had grown up on part of the original Parkes grant near Earlwood Oval. She never referred to herself as living in Earlwood, but living on "the Hill". I would think the story of the barges was part of oral local history passed down through the Parkes family and eventually to my mother.

Apart from the farm houses on the Earlwood side of the river there were other houses built in the Victorian Era, along Riverview Road. The two on the corners with Wardell Road were quite substantial. The river flooded periodically and my mother recalled seeing people taking to the roofs of their houses waiting to be rescued. One flood was so severe that it washed away the original Wardell Road suspension bridge and it was replaced by the present concrete structure. This bridge has a relatively high arch and was presumably built in anticipation that one day there might be commercial traffic along the river.

With increasing suburban development along the river more and more people were affected by this periodic flooding and eventually flood gates were installed under the Princes Highway Bridge at Tempe with the intention of minimising flooding along the river.

### 3. THE RIVER AS I REMEMBER IT

The flood gates were effective in minimising flooding but not in eliminating it entirely and there were times when the river spread over the river flats. Typically they reached part-way across Ewen Park and only rarely reached as far as Tennent Parade. When this happened people living there had their cars on the road ready to evacuate in case the water rose higher, but I don't recall there ever being a need for an evacuation to be made.

Nor did the river ever become a raging torrent. I attended Hurlstone Park South Infants' School and had to walk to school, crossing the river by the Lang Road footbridge and then crossing Ewen Park by a footpath raised a little above the general level of the park. In times of flood, I had to wear gumboots but I never felt in any danger. In fact, if anything it was a fun time. A favourite activity was stamping in the water trying to get each other as wet as possible.

There was a down side to the flood gates in that they limited the influx of tidal water, not only at flood times but at other times as well. This reduced the flushing effect of the tides. Popular folklore was that this had caused the river to silt up and the river had been "better" before the flood gates had been installed.

It was certainly true that in comparison with my mother's description, the river was far shallower than it had once been but I don't believe this was due entirely to the flood gates.

Cooks River begins somewhere up near Yagoona and there is not much fall between there and where it joins Botany Bay I believe the river was always sluggish in its flow. The flood gates may have exacerbated this but they didn't cause it.

The siltation of the river was ultimately due to the clearing of land for urban development in the area drained by the river which caused an increase in the amount of silt being washed into the river. This is particularly so in the case of roads. In pre World War II days, the local council not the developer was responsible for the sealing of roads, installing kerb and guttering and footpaths and it was not uncommon for this to occur some years after people were living in the street.

For example, it was not until people were living along it for 20 years or so that Permanent Avenue was sealed from kerb to kerb. During that time, every two or three years council workers came along with truck loads of material to replace that which had been washed away from the dirt verges, and found its way into the river.

As the river became increasingly shallow, reeds began to grow along the river banks. These were not entirely continuous, on the outside of bends where the river kept eating at its banks, there were gaps in the reeds and the stretches of reeds where 2-300m long between the gaps. In some places the reeds almost choked the river with a gap of 6-7m between the reeds on one side of the river and the other.

With limited opportunities to come ashore from a boat, the boating picnics of my mother's day became a thing of the past.

My father was a keen fisherman and always had a small rowing boat which could be carried on the roof rack of a car. This enabled him to go anywhere he liked since it made him independent of a boat shed from which to hire a boat. He taught me to row a boat when I was about eight and from then on I had the use of the boat on the river.

One Saturday when I was in my early teens, two friends and I set off downriver in this boat to see how far we could go. We got as far as Unwins Bridge at Tempe station. Despite being on the river all day and travelling all that distance we saw no other boat on the river. The only boat I have seen on the river was some years later when the Sea Scouts made excursions along the river in their motor launch.

Every so often in summer when they were dry, the reeds caught fire, usually by someone having a surreptitious cigarette in a hideout or by vandals doing it deliberately. These were short lived because of the gaps in the reeds, and the fire brigade usually did no more than monitor them.

While they lasted, these fires were spectacular with flames leaping high in the air and smoke billowing above them. Except for the odd paling fence, these fires didn't do damage to any property, but nonetheless were a cause for concern.

Washing in those days was done by hand and was very labour intensive and time consuming. The wind-blown ash from the reed fires could travel considerable distances and there was always the possibility of it settling on washing that had been hung out to dry. When a reed fire started everyone raced to bring in any washing on the clothesline to avoid the necessity of having to redo it.

#### 4. NUMBER 19

The initial section of Permanent Avenue was once part of Prince Edward Avenue.

The northern section of Earlwood between Wardell Road and Thompson Street was subdivided soon after the end of World War I under a scheme to provide affordable blocks of land to ex-servicemen. Most of the streets were named after people and places which had been household names during the war.

The northern boundary of this subdivision was Prince Edward Avenue, named after the then heir to the throne who later, for a short time, became King Edward VIII. This road began at the junction of Wardell Road and Riverview Road and for the first dozen or so blocks paralleled Cooks River before deviating away from the river to continue on to Thompson Street.

The first two blocks on the river side had a block of land with a frontage to Riverview Road between their rear boundary and the river. All the other blocks from there to the deviation, including no. 19 (as was mentioned earlier) had the high water mark of the river as their rear boundary.

A little later, Permanent Avenue was created, starting at the deviation, but physically this looked like a continuation of the initial section of Prince Edward Avenue. Apparently it was confusing to have a name change on what was essentially a straight road so the initial section of Prince Edward Avenue became the initial section of Permanent Avenue.

None of the blocks along the original Permanent Avenue had a rear boundary at the river, there being a reserve between the two.

Except for no. 17 and no. 19, having direct access to the river was of little use because before clear water could be reached something like 4-5m of reeds had to be crossed. The reason why these two blocks differed was there was a semi-permanent watercourse forming the western boundary of no. 19.

This watercourse began somewhere up at Homer Street in Earlwood. I mentioned earlier that my mother's stepmother had been raised near Earlwood Oval. She told me that this watercourse had once contained more-or-less permanent ponds of clear water and that as a girl in the late 1800s she used to accompany her mother to do the family washing in them.

After heavy rain this watercourse carried eroded material which was deposited on the down river side of its junction with the river and over the years this had created a spit projecting into the river for about 12m. This was known locally as "Sandy" but it was comprised of very fine gravel rather than sand. Consequently it was not very fertile and was only sparsely covered by reeds. As a result, no. 17 and no. 19 had easy access to the river.

The eroded material was carried out further than the actual spit and the river was very shallow in the area around the end of the spit, even at high tide perhaps only one metre deep. To compensate for this impediment to its flow the river had carved out a large indentation into the bank at Ewen Park, but even here the water was shallow. Admittedly it was at very low tides but I have walked across the river from no. 19 to Ewen Park.

My parents moved into their new house at no. 19 in 1932. Soon after, after a night of heavy rain, they woke to find their brand new paling fence along the bank of the watercourse had been washed away. Possibly others had a similar experience because soon after this the watercourse was piped. There was no point in having the bottom of the pipe at the junction with the river, lower than the high water mark so the bed of the watercourse was graded to an even fall, the pipes laid on this and then covered over. This made the gully beside no. 19 about 1-2m higher than the bed of the original watercourse.

This only partially solved the problem in that after periods of particularly heavy rain the pipes were too small to carry all the water coming down from Earlwood and the water backed up in the pipe.

Along the way the main pipe collected the gutter water from the area around it. There were grated openings in the gutters and pipes carried this water into the main pipe. Water can however flow both ways and when the backed up water in the main pipe sought an escape route, it found it in the pipes leading to the gutters in Permanent Avenue and at times there was minor local flooding in Permanent Avenue after heavy rain.

This situation was rectified when as part of alterations to the river larger pipes were installed along the lower section of the original watercourse. As a result the gully beside no. 19 is now 2.5m or perhaps even higher, than the bed of the original watercourse.

Sandy gave me something that was available to very few people living along the river in my area – direct access to the river. It was only a matter of going through a gate in the back fence to reach the water's edge and the river was mine to enjoy.



## 5. WILDLIFE AND THE RIVER

The river was if anything brackish rather than salt but only tasted slightly of salt. In fact, it had a taste all its own which wasn't very pleasant. It was also very turbid and when swimming in it, anything past your elbow disappeared into a murky green haze.

These qualities didn't seem to worry some forms of wildlife which while not abundant, were plentiful. Ducks of various sorts were common. The only type I knew by name were coots but there were others. There were also swamphens. These seemed to be motivated by an overpowering curiosity. Every so often one could be found exploring the backyard at no. 19 and it was possible to get quite close to it.

I would think the reeds along the river provided an ideal nesting area for such birds.

When there were storms at sea the river flats were covered with hordes of seagulls and the occasional pelican. These seemed to have some form of communication amongst themselves. They would arrive in masse and leave the same way. They were only slightly disconcerted by the presence of people and if approached would flutter only a short distance away before landing again. Children at the toddler age particularly enjoyed chasing them.

In the river there were water rats and tortoises. They were probably more abundant than the infrequent sightings of them would suggest.

There were also fish in the river. Literally hundreds of fingerlings congregated at the mouth of the drain beside no. 19, feeding off the

debris that was washed down it. At times there were schools of mullet swimming along the river. The only time a fish could actually be seen was when one leapt out of the water, but the schools swam close to the surface and created a slight turbulence so it was possible to track the path of the school.

A little to the east of Canterbury Road, Cup and Saucer Creek joins the river on the southern side. During the depression years most of the creek had been concreted and turned into a drain under a scheme which provided work for the unemployed. This work had destroyed the unusual rock formation which gave the creek its name. Before joining the river, the creek cascaded over a rockshelf about 2m high and the concrete work ended at this rockshelf. As a result, a deep pool about 12m in diameter had been scoured out between the rockshelf and the general line of the river. Some local lads claimed to have reached the bottom of the pool but I never could.

In this pool were carp, at times swimming near the surface and quite visible. They were generally brown in colour but had areas of white, yellow, orange and red on them, the same colours as the koi carp people keep in ornamental ponds, but the colours were not as extensive as the colours on these.

At a guess, I would think that someone had released some koi carp into the pool and they had, over the generations, partially regressed to the wild carp from which they had been bred. Further, I think they had been able to survive because the fresh water coming down the creek, passing through the pool then flowing into the river, kept the brackish water of the river out of the pool and the carp had a suitable environment in which to live and breed.

In the river there were eels – lots for them. Some of them congregated along with the fingerlings at the mouth of the pipe running beside no. 19. These eels were up to 70cm or so in length and could be as thick as a wrist. They were generally brown in colour but varied from being almost black to a light brown or green. They would lie with their mouths facing the drain, feeding off the debris coming down it, moving only sufficiently to maintain their position against the slight flow of water out of the drain.

It was very disconcerting, when swimming in the river to stand up and tread on an eel. It was a choice between the swimmer and the eel as to who got the biggest fright.

In addition to the fish and eels, the river also contained prawns. Of all the various forms of wildlife in and along the river, prawns were the most plentiful. When the conditions were right, they were in abundance.

## 6. PEOPLE AND THE RIVER

During the summer months people took advantage of what the river had to offer. The most popular activity among adults was prawning, done at night.

Prawning was done using a net about 5m long strung between two poles. Along the top of the net was a rope threaded with large corks and on the bottom a similar rope threaded with lead weights, this was so the net assumed a vertical position when in the water. The prawns were caught by two men, one on each pole, walking along the river bed, against the current, as far apart as possible. The net was then brought ashore ensuring the bottom line remained in contact with the river bed as the water shallowed, so the prawns couldn't escape.

Apart from a net, two other pieces of equipment were needed – a light so the prawns could be seen and removed from the net, and a bucket to put them in.

There were relatively few places along the river which were suitable for doing all this. The river and its bank had to be free of reeds, otherwise the net became fouled and, the water had to be shallow enough to walk along, about waist deep. Suitable places seemed to occur about every 300m or so along the river and during summer the river was dotted with the lights of the prawners.

Sandy met all the requirements for a good prawning spot and my father and later I, made frequent use of it.

When I was young, my father and I would go down to Sandy. As I was too small to do my share of walking with the net, I would wade

out to where the water was up to my waist and my father would do a circuit with the net. If the catch was large enough we would stop and he'd contact a neighbour or a relative to tell them the prawns were "on".

The two men then took over the role of catching the prawns and I together with any other children who came, carried the catch up to our laundry where the womenfolk cooked the prawns.

Ours was a conventional laundry for those times, a gas copper and a double set of tubs. The prawns first went into a tub of fresh water which caused them to regurgitate, then into a second tub of fresh water to make certain that the regurgitation was complete. This caused them to lose all taste they may have acquired from the river. Finally the prawns were cooked in the boiling water in the copper.

Usually the prawning lasted only about two hours. There was no point in catching a huge number of prawns because in those days people only had an ice chest for keeping food fresh. Refrigerators were a novelty. Consequently the catch was limited to how many prawns could be eaten on the night plus a few kilos for each family to put on ice.

There were exceptions to this. About once or twice a year the prawns were so abundant that the catching went on until our dining room table which seated eight was piled so high with prawns that it couldn't hold any more. When this happened, all the neighbours and relatives who lived locally were invited to join in. The only requirement was that they "bring some bread and butter if they could". The butter was important because it was rationed during the war and in short supply.

The night ended with a sing song around the piano. There always seemed to be two or three people who had a repertoire of songs they knew by heart, someone who could play the spoons and someone who brought along a ukulele or banjo.

Later in my early teens I and my friends went prawning independently of my father. We weren't as serious about it as he was and spent more time yarning around a fire than actually prawning.

Eels aren't generally regarded as edible by Australians but they are in European countries, even to the extent of being regarded as a delicacy.

After World War II there were a lot of European people displaced from their country of origin during the war, who didn't want to return home because their country was under communist rule. Australia (and other countries) opened the door to these people and we gave them the name of New Australians.

By then, the work on improving the river had begun and in many places the reeds had been removed, giving a clear access to the river from its banks. Many New Australians took advantage of this and of a weekend places like Ewen Park were lined with people fishing for eels.

Mostly the fishing was done by men. Sometimes it was two or three sitting together, yarning between bites. Others chose to make it a family day out. The men fished, the women sat on rugs and chattered while they prepared a picnic lunch and the children played in the park.

They all seemed to have an enjoyable day out as well as catching their evening meal.

On one memorable Saturday I and a friend who was visiting went down to the river and happened to look at the mouth of the drain. I saw something I've never seen before or after. Instead of eels lying placidly at the mouth of the drain there were dozens of them swimming around in a loose knot, over and under each other. We raced up to the house and got the prawn net, shouted to those fishing on the other side of the river to get their attention and dropped the net over this knot of eels.

We had difficulty lifting the net up it was so heavy and it was so full that eels were piled up in the net and a lot of them slipped off the pile and dropped back into the water. By the time we landed the net the first of the people from the other side of the river arrived. They'd had to run along Ewen Park to the bridge at Lang Road then back again to Sandy. Depending on their starting point this was about 500m and not all of them who set out made it. Those who did, left carrying an eel in each hand.

Eels and prawns were the only things edible in the river. Mullet are prone to pick up the taste of the water they swim in, and tasted of the river. As far as I know, nobody had worked out a way to cook the wild ducks so that became tender.

By far the biggest age group that engaged in activities along the river were boys and youths.

Swimming was a widely enjoyed activity. Sometimes of a weekend in summer a group of us would congregate at Sandy and swim to the other side of the river or down to the footbridge at Lang Road, just for the fun of it. At other times we'd challenge each other to a race.

There were other popular spots along the river for doing much the same thing.

One was the footbridge across the river near Hutton's Bacon Factory. Here the main activity was to jump off the bridge into the water, swim to the bank, get back on the bridge and jump off again. Today, in hindsight, this seems to be a mindless sort of thing to do but it kept the participants occupied for hours. A variation was to try to "bomb" someone who had jumped off the bridge a moment or two before in order to disconcert them. During summer, on a weekend or in the school holidays there could be a dozen or more people engaged in these activities.

Canoeing was also popular. The canoes were homemade out of a sheet of corrugated iron folded along the middle corrugation. The corrugations on either side of the fold at the end of the sheet were flattened and nailed to a piece of wood. Then, at the middle of the sheet, the fold was pulled apart, giving a traditional canoe shape.

At this stage the canoe wasn't watertight because of gaps between the iron and the pieces of wood. These we sealed with tar.

In those days, roads were sealed with tar rather than bitumen and on a hot summer's day, the tar would melt and form runnels. These could be scraped up and it only took a short time to fill a jam tin with soft tar. I should add that this was during the war years when petrol was rationed and there was very little traffic.

These canoes were not very stable and tipped over easily. Being made of iron, they then sank, so the last step in constructing a canoe was to tie a piece of rope to it with a piece of wood tied to the other

end. When the canoe sank, this floated to the surface and the canoe could be located. This was an essential part of the canoe since the main purpose of having one was to get close enough to someone else's and tip it over.

At times we formed gangs and had wars. Each gang had a hideout in the reeds which could only be reached by following a devious path to it.

Mattresses were also used in these wars. People weren't as environmentally conscious then as they are today and the sort of rubbish which now is disposed of by council clean up days was usually thrown into the river. This included mattresses. These were kapok filled and floated. Consequently they were prized in our wars. The down side was that they were not very manoeuvrable and a person in a canoe could easily elude a person on a mattress. Consequently battle plans were devised in which canoeists distracted the victim until the mattress could be brought close enough to create the desired outcome.

After the war, a more sophisticated form of canoe became available.

During the war, aircraft carried auxiliary fuel tanks to extend their flying time away from their base. These were tear drop in shape and circular in cross section and carried under the plane. They became known as "belly tanks". After the war, these became readily available at disposal stores which sold off military equipment which was no longer needed in peace time.

Using an oxyacetylene torch, a piece was cut out of a belly tank to form a cockpit. The cut out piece was then welded into the tank to

form a backrest and a watertight compartment behind it. Belly tanks had the advantage over corrugated iron canoes in that they were unsinkable but they were still unstable. More sophisticated versions began to appear with outriggers or with two tanks joined together to form a catamaran. These even became available commercially.

There were always claims that the river was polluted and it certainly had a reputation for being so. If it was, it wasn't the sort of pollution which affected people. Throughout my years of close association with the river, I don't recall anyone becoming ill from eating prawns or developing a rash from swimming in it

## 7. PEOPLE AND THE RIVER FLATS

The farms of my mother's day had all gone and the river flats were all used, one way or another, for public recreation. A few copses of casuarina trees remained and there was the odd tree along the river banks but for the most part the flats were grassed, although in some low lying areas rushes were more common than grass.

During the weekends, the flats were used for men's team sports. These were cricket in summer and one of the football codes in winter. Of these, soccer was the most common. This, I've since found out was unusual. Most of my contemporaries tell me that in their childhood, soccer was something they only read about in English comic books but in my immediate area there was a district soccer competition and a very strong soccer competition amongst teams from protestant churches. I must have been about 12 or older before I realised that rugby league was a game played by teams other than those in the Catholic Youth Organisation.

There was no television in those days and listening to a radio broadcast didn't quite capture the excitement of watching a live game so local sport attracted a lot of spectators. There were those who had an interest in a particular team who came along to watch it play and there were those who lived locally who came to their nearest playing field to watch a game – any game, irrespective of which teams were playing and the game they were playing.

Ewen Park fitted this pattern. The passive recreation area with its mounds and trees is a relatively recent addition to the park's facilities and during weekends, the whole area was devoted to competitive sport.

The facilities provided were only basic, being a building in which players could change and a public toilet. The areas allocated to each game were, in the case of cricket a series of little flags and for soccer white lines on the grass. There was nothing to stop a wayward ball from one game entering the area allocated to the neighbouring game and interfering with the play that was going on there.

Nor was there anything to stop a ball making it into the river. This wasn't too bad when it only made it into the reeds, but when it made it into the actual river, someone had to strip off and retrieve it. It took a hardy soul to retrieve a soccer ball in mid-winter.

A little further down the river is today, the Wills Sports Grounds. This was once known as the Hordernian Sports Grounds and owned by Anthony Hordern and Sons which for some considerable time was arguably Sydney's largest department store. Its building occupied the site of today's World Square in George Street. As was the case with several other large Sydney based department stores it misread the impact that the post-war development of regional shopping centres would have on its business and eventually had to close.

The Hordernian Sports Grounds included the area to the north of the Wills Sports Grounds which is now part of Marrickville Golf Course. The original course of the river ran round the outskirts of the golf course but when alterations were made to the river, a new channel was dug which separated the Hordernian Sports Grounds into two parts.

The part which is now the Wills Sports Ground was used for rugby league and matches in the Catholic Youth Organisation competition were played there. It was well developed in terms of its facilities with

a picket fence separating players and spectators. There was also a grandstand for spectators and underneath it change rooms for players. The whole area was fenced, for the most part with 2m high galvanised iron. At the entrance gate on Wardell Road for about 5-6m the fence was made of chain wire and a fee was charged for entry into the grounds.

It was always possible to tell when a "good" game was being played because of the stream of people walking down from Dulwich Hill station to the ground.

A lot of local people also habitually walked from the station to their destination rather than catch a bus. Most stopped at the chain wire fence to watch the game and on a Sunday afternoon the crowd at the gate could be three or four people deep.

Some locals were more enterprising and cut peep holes in the fence with a tommyhawk. At times whole sheets were removed and possibly wound up as canoes.

At the rear of the grandstand was a tennis club house and four tennis courts. Tennis was very popular at the time and most days there was at least one court in use. The courts were lit and this applied to most nights as well.

The area which is now part of the golf course was also marked out for rugby league, I think four in all. The area was very low lying and only a little above the high water mark of the river. Consequently it was always muddy and covered with rushes and moss-like vegetation, rather than grass. The only games I can recall seeing played there

were those of the in-school house competition of Canterbury Boys High School.

On the other side of Wardell Road to the Wills Sports Ground is Beaman Park. This was formerly the Western Suburbs Combined Churches Cricket Union Grounds. The "Combined Churches" were protestant and the grounds were used for the cricket and soccer competitions between members of these churches.

The area was unfenced so no charge could be made on spectators. The only income available to the organisation was a fee levied on players which was small and so with limited income available facilities were fairly basic. Dotted around the park near Riverview Road were half a dozen single room buildings with a verandah facing the playing area. These had unlined weatherboards for walls and shutters for windows and were used as change rooms for players. On a Saturday there always seemed to be a sea of players at these grounds and I suspect more games were being played at any one time than the number of change rooms would suggest.

Being a private landholder the organisation had to pay rates to the council. These were undoubtedly heavily subsidised by the council but nonetheless created a drain on the organisation's limited finances, so periodically they sold off blocks of land along Wardell Road to cover the shortfall.

Then, after the war, the State Government tried to limit the urban sprawl of Sydney by creating a "Green Belt" around the then suburbs of Sydney. This was an area, some kilometres wide in which no development could take place. The government also banned the alienation of any open space within the area bounded by the Green

Belt, so consequently no more blocks of land could be sold off and the organisation became heavily indebted to the council for unpaid rates. Some arrangement was made with the local council which now owns the land. It is named for a former mayor of Canterbury Council.

On the other side of the river the Beaman Park is now the bulk of Marrickville Golf Course. This is almost divided in two by a rocky bluff in the vicinity of Chadwick Avenue which runs off Riverside Crescent.

At the foot of this bluff the river bank was once retained by a wall of dressed stone and behind this wall, the ground had been levelled with crushed stone. In several places along this wall were the rusted remnants of iron inserts, possibly iron rings.

The face of the bluff was also lined with dressed stone and at each end a flight of stairs led to the top of the bluff.

It would seem obvious that all this had some connection with the river in earlier times. One possibility is that, before bridges were built it was the mooring for a punt or a ferry across the river. There is also another possibility. In Riverside Crescent, between Wardell Road and Chadwick Avenue there were once brickpits. These have been filled in and houses built on them but I remember them as still being there, fenced off and full of water. They were there for a long time before that. My uncle (my mother's youngest brother) once told me they were unfenced in his boyhood and were a popular swimming spot. Perhaps the stonework had some association with a brickworks that had long since disappeared.

I can't remember what the western (Wardell Road) side of this section of the golf course was used for but I do remember that the

eastern section was used for soccer and cricket. This area had no changing facilities for players but it did have a shop which only opened on a weekend. This became the original club house for the golf club.

The extreme end of this area (now an oval) was very low lying and covered with rushes. It had at one time been used for soccer because there were derelict soccer goal posts lying in the mud. The other side of Illawarra Road was also low lying. In fact, the approaches to the bridge on the Marrickville side were at one time about a metre above the level of the river flats but in my time the level of Steel Park, on the eastern of these approaches was being raised by being used as a rubbish dump.

I attended West Marrickville Primary School and we had our Friday afternoon sports on the area now occupied by the golf course. We were dismissed at the park, and sometimes, instead of going home some of us went over to scavenge on this dump. I don't recall ever finding anything worthwhile enough to take home but the beauty about scavenging is that you never know what you might find.

Some distance away from the face of the dump was a building sitting in isolation amidst the mud and rushes. It looked derelict. The iron roof had rusted to an orange colour and the weatherboard cladding had turned grey with age. The building was set on piers a little higher than most buildings and there were four or five steps to reach floor level.

One day, three or four of us walked over to satisfy our curiosity about it. On it was painted a barely legible sign, "Cooks River Lifesaving Club". We tried unsuccessfully to give each other a leg up in

order to look through the windows, then someone tried the door and to our surprise, the door was unlocked so we went in.

Inside were tables and chairs and even more surprising the whole was clean and tidy and looked as though it was still in use. On the sink were cups left to drain. On the walls were posters describing the then method of resuscitating an apparently drowned person and aspects of first aid.

I would think the building dated from the time when the river was used for boating picnics. This was a time when, except after periods of heavy rain, the river was confined between its banks and the river flats were inundated only infrequently and were much drier than I can remember them. This would also explain the derelict soccer goal posts on the other side of Illawarra Road which were mentioned earlier.

As to the apparent cleanliness of the building, perhaps this was a faulty perception of childhood or perhaps the mud surrounding the building kept dust to a minimum and spiders at bay, but I don't really know.

## 8. THE ALTERATIONS TO THE RIVER

In my childhood years, Cooks River had a bad press. Everyone "knew" the river was polluted, was full of silt and reeds, and that it periodically flooded. No one canvassed the opinions of small boys like myself who found so much to enjoy in the river as it was.

In 1943 work began on changing the river by dredging it and installing iron sheet pilings along the banks to retain them. Undoubtedly those responsible for the decision to carry out this work saw it as an improvement of the river. I can't see it that way so I have chosen to refer to these changes as "alterations" rather than "improvements".

I find it strange that the work should begin at that time which was in the middle of the war in the Pacific against Japan during WW II. There was nothing pressing for the work to be done at that particular time and it resulted in the diversion of iron and fuel away from Australia's war effort. It was a time when there were scrap metal drives for the war effort and fuel for civilian use was severely rationed.

With the exception of the new channel which separated Wills Sports Ground from Marrickville Golf Course, the river between Canterbury and the Wardell Road Bridge follows the same general course as it did before the alterations but there were many minor changes made which have resulted in the river having a more disciplined appearance than it had in the past. The river is now uniform in its width whereas once it varied. Minor indentations in the banks have been filled in and changes in direction have been smoothed out by excavating on the inside of bends and filling in on the other side of these bends.

The work associated with the deepening of the river was done using a large dragline. This machine was on caterpillar tracks with drive wheels about 1.5 metres in diameter. It was very cumbersome to move and could take a full day to manoeuvre it from one position to the next as it progressed down river.

When the jib was fully extended the bucket could be swung out as far as the other side of the river so the machine stayed on the Hurlstone Park/Dulwich Hill side of the river, where the alluvial soils are quite soft. Consequently, despite having the caterpillar tracks the machine tended to sink into the ground. To prevent this happening, large baulks of timber were laid to make a pathway when the machine was being moved.

On the jib was a sign reading "Bucyrus". Someone pronounced it as "Buckyrus" and the name stuck. The correct pronunciation is "Bucyrus" which is the name of an American company specialising in the manufacture of large earthmoving equipment.

What happened next in any one place depended on the relationship between the existing course of the river and the intended one. In places where the intended course was lined with solid ground the intended course of the river was created by digging into this solid ground with a mechanical digger. This machine was much smaller than the dragline and had an articulated arm worked by hydraulics. It removed material to create a sloping bank which remained stable until the iron pilings could be installed.

Not all places were affected by this. Where the river had for example indentations in its bank, these were left untouched. Consequently there were places which still provided easy access to the

river and swimming and canoeing continued throughout most of the period that the river was being deepened and realigned. Prawning however progressively came to an end as the river became too deep to walk along its bed.

The mechanical digger operated at one time or another along both sides of the river. For it to do so, those properties that once had the river as their rear boundary had seven metres or so of their land resumed. In fact, the first time I became aware that something was being done to the river was, when arriving home from school, I found workmen in our backyard erecting a new fence across the lower part of it, because number 19 was affected by this resumption.

The material removed by all this digging was varied in nature. Some was alluvial soil from the river banks, some was ooze and mud from the river bed and some was vegetation in various stages of decay. Eventually this material was used for fill or landscaping but since it was all waterlogged it was usually stockpiled to dry out, near the digging site, before it was moved to where it was needed.

Much of the material wound up as forming the levee bank along the river at Ewen Park, raising the level of the ground on the area of Marrickville Golf Course that had once been part of the Hordernian Sports Grounds and filling in the former river course around it, and, forming the tees and greens of the golf course.

The movement of the decaying vegetation liberated methane gas and for a time, the cloying stench of this gas hung around the stockpiles.

The mud which was removed from the river bed was full of oyster shells. Most of these were broken but every so often there was an intact one. These could be as big as the palm of an adult's hand and the inside was a milky iridescent hue. The river bed must have been covered with algae because after digging had occurred, rafts of algae appeared on the surface. These could be as big as a dinner plate but most were smaller. They were a rich emerald green in colour and quite pretty to look at but if when swimming one brushed passed your mouth it left a horrible taste.

The digging also resulted in the growth of a sort of coral – at least I think it did because I wasn't aware of it before the digging began. It grew on clods of earth below the waterline along the river banks and on the timbers supporting the bridges over the river. It consisted of small tubes – about 2mm in diameter of white chalk-like material. Inside each was a worm. Over time, like coral, new tubes grew on old tubes and eventually it developed into clumps.

The river is now lined continuously with iron pilings but these were installed in sections. The places where the river had to be narrowed or across the face of any indentation were the first sections to have iron pilings. The pilings were quite long – six metres or more and were cast with hooks down the sides, so that each piling was interconnected with its neighbours. A pile driver, mounted on a barge was used to drive the piles down. For months on end there was the steady whump-whump-whump sound, day after day, as the pile driver did its work.

The barge was constructed out of hollow metal cubes about one metre in each dimension. These were bolted together to create a

working platform. Thus the whole thing could be easily dismantled if it was necessary to do so to pass under a bridge.

Where it was possible to do so, the pilings were driven down to a uniform height. In other places, rock was encountered before this could happen so the pile was cut using an oxyacetylene torch.

Once a section had been completed, an iron beam was welded to the back of each piling, a little down from the top. This further strengthened the connection of each piling to its neighbours which had been initially created by the hooks down the side of each.

To further strengthen the iron wall created by the pilings, about three metres back from the wall a large wooden pile was driven into the ground at an angle and it and the wall connected by a rod with a turnbuckle in it which when tightened assisted in the wall remaining vertical.

Finally the ground behind the wall was filled in to provide a level surface along the banks of the river. Inevitably this initial filling compressed under its own weight and every so often was topped up.

In many places along the river, the level of the new banks was higher than the previous ground level, so the new level was carried back as far as necessary and not confined to the seven metres or so of easement. This included private property. At number 19 for example (and other similar affected properties) the ground level at the rear of the property had originally been only slightly above the high water mark of the river. This area was filled in and levelled according to my father's wishes at no cost to him.

Much of the work described above could best be described as maintenance or beautification rather than developmental but it is difficult to put a date on the change over. The whole activity was undertaken at a leisurely pace. Even in the early stages there were periods during which no work was done, and these periods gradually lengthened into months. Then, a small team of workmen and perhaps a machine would appear, carry out some work then disappear. Consequently it was in the late 60s before it was apparent that the work had been completed.

At some stage the flood gates at Tempe were removed and the difference between high and low tides in the river increased. With this, the salinity of the river increased and the police went around the local schools warning the children about swimming in the river because of the possibility of sharks. I don't think they needed to have bothered. Although there were ladders welded to the iron pilings at intervals along the river, access to the water was difficult and swimming in the river was a thing of the past.

Once all the work was completed trees were planted on the river bank along Ewen Park. For a time a water tanker periodically watered them, but this didn't last long enough for the trees to survive. Had they done so they would have done much to soften the harsh discipline imposed on the river by the iron pilings.

One of the purposes of undertaking the alterations was to prevent the flooding of Ewen Park, and in this the project was successful. I continued to visit my parents at number 19 until the 1970s and while there were times when it looked like it might, the river never breached its banks during that time.

Success however came at a price. The price was the destruction of a way of life that had existed for generations. There are times when I think the price was too high.