

FEBRUARY 1999



BIDDIP

Newsletter of the Toodyay Friends of
the River

BIDDIP Volume 1 Issue 1

Inside this issue:

<i>Presidents Message</i>	2
<i>Support by Water and Rivers Commission</i>	3
<i>Commercial and Community support</i>	3
<i>Launch of River Recovery Plans</i>	3
<i>History of the Central Avon River</i>	4
<i>Avon Patrol</i>	7
<i>Volunteer Working Suggestion</i>	8



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President's Message

Welcome to the first edition of *Biddip*, the newsletter of the Toodyay Friends of the River.

It is planned to produce two newsletters a year, packed with stories about the history of the Avon River, what is happening along it, and how the *Friends* are contributing towards its restoration and management. Jim Masters has written an article for this edition, and promises more; so has Dorine Morrow. Members are also asked to contribute articles - there are many little stories about daily life along the river that need to be recorded, both past and present, so please, share your story with your

Friends.

History of the *Friends*

Interest in forming the *Friends* began in 1994, when a small group of people met to discuss ways of improving the River's health. Further attempts were made over the next few years to get the group off the ground, but it was not until early 1998 that enough interest was generated to formalize the organisation. The inaugural Annual General Meeting was held on August 16th 1998, and the *Friends* became an incorporated body on September 18th 1998.

Over the next 12 months, there are a number of projects that the *Friends* are to be involved with. An application has been submitted

to the Shire's Local Native Tree and Understorey Scheme for the supply of plants. An application has also been submitted to the Minister for the Environment's Community Conservation Grants for assistance to purchase a Chipper/Mulcher, and we have prepared an application to the Natural Heritage Trust for part funding of a Ribbons of Blue Coordinator to assist the Toodyay District High School (and other schools in the area) with their Ribbons of Blue water quality monitoring.

An exciting year ahead? It surely will be! So come, join with us in 'making *Friends* with the River'

Wayne Clarke
President

Support by the Water and Rivers Commission

The Water and Rivers Commission, through the Avon River Management Authority (ARMA), have generously supported the *Friends* with the donation of a computer from their disposal scheme. This donation has made life much easier for our President, who has been struggling with an electric typewriter for many years. The computer is also being used to help other community groups, like the Toodyay

Land Conservation District Committee and the Rural Watch, with their administration. The community groups concerned are most indebted to the Water and Rivers Commission. This newsletter is an example of the use that the computer has been put to.

Thanks must also go to the Toodyay Land Conservation District Committee who purchased a printer for the computer. Paul Sutton and

the Rural Watch have also contributed to the system, with Paul's computing skills solving some of the initial problems with the software.

The support from the Water and Rivers Commission and ARMA throughout the formative years of the *Friends* is a great example of how the community are being assisted by the State Government. Thankyou for your support!

Commercial and community sponsorship

The Toodyay *Friends of the River* have been lucky in securing the support of a major sponsor in their first year.

Vernice Earthmoving Equipment have given us a huge start to our existence with a most generous dona-

tion. This has enabled the *Friends* to become incorporated, allowed us to purchase some equipment, and to procure trees for revegetation work. Our organisation is most grateful for that donation, which has put us 'on our feet'. Earth Craft Nursery have donated many trees, and

community sponsorship from people like the Brennan Family and Jim Masters has made the *Friends* even more independent.

To all our sponsors we wish to express our sincere gratitude, and wish them a belated Happy and Prosperous New Year.

Launch of River Recovery Plans

The River Recovery Plans for Section Three of the Avon River (Toodyay Townsite to Deepdale) will be launched this month, during our meeting. It was decided to have breakfast in

Duidgee Park prior to our February working bee, followed by the General Meeting. During the meeting, the Water and Rivers Commission will officially launch the River Recovery Plans and

present the computer to the *Friends*. All members and their Families and friends are welcome to join us for the launch, followed by morning tea.

History of the Central Avon River

by Jim Masters

(Memories of the River, 1928 to 1960, before the Training Scheme)

This story is about how the river was used for recreation in that part from Burlong Pool upstream from Northam to Deepdale Pool downstream of the West Toodyay river bend. It's along here, and up to Beverley, that big pools existed.

In this stretch of the river there were seven large and deep pools, fifteen feet [4.5m] or more in depth and up to seventy five yards [68.5m] in width. These, with the shallower Northam Town Weir, were the most used by the folk for recreation.

Not much boating by grown-ups then, though the kids sometimes fiddled about in their home made canoes, 'cobbled' up usually from twelve foot [3.65m] lengths of corrugated roofing iron with the rear end panel of wood from a four gallon petrol tin container. These were not very safe contraptions and most of them sooner or later sank without trace, though I cannot recall that any of us were silly enough to get drowned for there were few who had not already learnt to swim.

It is well known that Burlong Pool was the main

one used by Northam people and many hundreds of children learned to swim there up to 1939.

During the war years units from the Army Training Camp took over and many of the troops did all sorts of activities there. This use then continued long after the end of the war years in 1945 until it finally silted up by 1970, but any swimming had virtually been given up by Northam people by 1950. The river areas at Katrine were also used for Army training 1940-1950.

In the 1930's, as now, the Northam Town Weir was not much used for boating, even less swimming, most of it too shallow particularly following the very dry winters of 1935 to 1944.. Only one wet winter in this period was 1939 that flushed the whole river system, for the very severe flooding in Toodyay of March 1943 from the Boyagerring Brook/Nunyle area did not cause any flooding at Northam. The District Health Officer, Dr. Beamish, had to have the Northam Weir closed for swimming several times over summer up to 1944. So even then it was given over to the White Swans and plenty of other birdlife.

With many people likely

to be about these two pools no duck shooting was allowed except a little at the upper end of Burlong. However, at all the other pools down river this was a constant activity for an ever increasing number of duck hunters each 'open season' from Christmas to usually the end of March. And a few 'stray' shots at other times did occur.

For a number of people inclined to be fisherman there were places in all these large pools and a few smaller 'scour' pools in the 'braided', that is the forested river bed sections between them. Often a good catch of 'Cobbler', a fresh water catfish, could be made at night if you were 'in the know' where these places were. As the salinity of the river water rapidly increased after the 1945-46 floods their numbers dwindled away to very few by 1960. Also the introduced Carp were killed off by 1950, this probably a good result we now know. Anyway they, even when plentiful, were very difficult to catch by hook and line, but easy to trap in backwaters by netting them in floods.

(Continued on page 4)

History of the Central Avon River (cont)

by Jim Masters

(Continued from page 3)

Downstream of Northam five to six kilometres there is 'Egoline' Pool about 1 kilometre long, now totally silted up. Then a shorter pool you can still see from the Northam road, known as 'Wash' Pool, this is now nearly full of sand. Both were used for swimming by the nearby farming families. Between the road and the river 1929 to 1932 growing tobacco was attempted by three Italian migrant families using water pumped from the Wash Pool. The product was not all that good as anyone who tried smoking a few batches of W.A. made 'Luxor' ciggs it was used in will tell you. Well laced with slat with a touch of magnesium gave interesting results, enough to put off would be smokers forever.

However, back to the Egoline Pool, one enthusiastic swimmer was Justin Walsh who could swim up and down this long pool three or four times without stopping. This had been part of his training before winning the 'Swim Through Perth' in 1928.

At Katrine Bridge (or Causeway as it is still known to we older people) can be seen 'Katrine' Pool upstream and 'Glen Avon' Pool downstream. Now they

appear to be one pool at a common level but originally were two separate pools with a 'braided' section of riverbed forest about one third of a kilometre long between them. Katrine Pool is now largely silted up. Glen Avon not as yet so badly. The 'Causeway' was built by convict labour between 1853 and 1867.

Katrine, the name was originally spelt 'Katerine' by the early settlers, this name from the aboriginal word Katta-ine, meaning a 'place of big hills.'

The Katrine Pool was not much used for swimming, a bit at the top end which had some sand on the foreshore there. But some good 'Cobbler' fishing spots were about this pool, and an easy access place for duck shooters to congregate at the beginning of the open season on Boxing Day each year.

It was in the Glen Avon Pool that there were developed two places for swimming, one of these at the top end where the short bit of riverbed forest ended. Here George Jessup a well known 'naturalist' who lived in Northam would bring out on week-ends groups of mostly High School students, teach them something about the bush and have a great time

'mucking about' in the river. One of these was [television personality] Harry Butler who, like so many other children learnt a lot about the bush from George, and came to know the river well both here and at West Toodyay. This place was used from about 1928 to 1939. The Glen Avon Pool is retained by a weir.

Down towards the bottom end below the Glen Avon homestead we had a jetty, diving springboard and a raft fixed out in the centre of the pool about seventy five yards (68.5 metres) broad as it still is for most of its kilometre length. In summer most of the neighbours and many other friends came to swim here from 1920 to 1950. Two of these were Clee Jenkins (the CLH Jenkins who wrote wild-life articles for the West Australian Newspaper for about sixty years), and Peter McMillan, an expert biologist in later life. These people, whose parents were Toodyay or Northam residents, well remembered their early days of hunting for wild-life in the Avon both here and elsewhere.

The next big pool down river is 'Millard' Pool now held at the bottom end by

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 5)

Extracts Weir. Millard is the longest pool of all and at the top end just up river of the old Ellery homesite close to the road was the place where the Toodyay Swimming Club had its facilities. There are a couple of old posts still there, part of the jetty, diving springboard and 'turning boards' set up for a fifty yard (46 metre) course in which to race. Then about fourteen feet deep it is now silted up.

Mr. Jim Ellery the owner of this land was a great sponsor of this public amenity from about 1928 to 1936 I think, though I was a member of the Club only from 1934 to 1936 after coming home from school in Perth. At this time Northam had a swimming club at Burlong Pool and there was another within the York townsite. There still is at both places a few posts left on the Rivers banks, those that held the diving boards. At least this was so when last seen in 1995. So it was that three times each summer/autumn, turn about, each Club held a competitive carnival with quite a bit of rivalry between them. The Kingston Family provided

some of the best swimmers in the Toodyay Club, and Tom Drake-Brockman (later Senator) a leading diving exponent.

Below Extracts Weir about half a kilometre is 'Lloyd's' Pool, then mostly referred to as 'Red Banks'. Unlike Millard, now considerably silted up, Red Banks has scoured out into a much larger basin formation.

It was severe erosion here rapidly after the Training Scheme that forced the building of Extract's Weir in the late 1960's. I personally never swum here, never went to school in Toodyay, but from all accounts this was a handy place near Toodyay town where the kids could nip out after school.

I did see it however after the great flood of March 1934 (this was on the 9th of March when the river rose fifteen feet (4.57 metres) over night). The pool was much narrower with the bottom end some sand. Not the more usual fine silty mud often knee deep along all the foreshores in most places about the other pools. So here the local kids could scramble in and out without smelling like polecats, for there were no nice

showers provided before reaching home from most other pools.

Finally the 'Deepdale' Pool, below West Toodyay, and close to the orange orchard, sometimes there were family picnics held in summer. Two or three times in the late 1920's as a young boy I had a dip there. This was a beautiful place, quite a bit narrower than the bigger ones about Katrine, with lots of shady trees on its banks. It too is mostly silted up.

There was virtually no permanent siltation of any pool before the Training Scheme, except in Northam Weir, these pools being rejuvenated after each big winter flood.

So in the 1920's and 1930's children living along the river had learned to swim in it by the age of seven or eight. Both boys and girls had learnt all about its mud and leeches on their legs, and to be wary of how steeply these pools shelved off into deep water. Come a hot day and back we went for more.

Certainly the quality of the river water deteriorated a lot by

(Continued on page 8)

Avon Patrol

by Dorine Morrow

The following is a summary of observations made during ten years of walking by the river through Toodyay Townsite at approximately 7am each day. It all began as exercise for the dog (Mr. Casey when we first moved to Mt. Anderson Street Toodyay, and developed into taking note of the water-birds frequenting the river. Ultimately, an exhibition of drawings and paintings "Birds of the Avon" presented by the Avon Valley Arts Society (Northam, 1992) drew quite a large number of interested viewers.

During the years of observation there have been changes in the variety of bird life in the area. Common to this area are the Pacific Black Duck, Grey Teal, White-faced Heron, Black-winged (Pied) Stilt, Little Black and Little Pied Cormorant and, for most of the year, the Black-fronted Plover (Dotterel).

Periodic visitors include the large (Great) Egret/ 760-915mm tall, snowy-white plumage and a lanky frame, with head and neck when stretched out being nearly one and a half times as long as its body. The Sacred Ibis is usually seen in the sum-

mer months, December - March, when they move up from southerly regions. Spoonbills, too, move in about this time of the year and the Common Sandpiper arrives about October and departs in March for its migratory flight to South-East Asia. The Australian Shelduck (Mountain Duck) returns for the breeding season and sometimes the Maned (Wood) Duck, though this has not been seen in 1998. It is distinguished by its cat-like call. I have seen just one clutch of ducklings being launched on the water by their attendant parents.

Unusual visitors include the pelicans (two at most) which pause for a day or two on their flight north for breeding. The Black Swan, two only were seen spending two days with us. The small white (Little) Egret and the White-necked (Pacific) Heron stayed for a short while but only on one occasion, and rare visitors now are the Coot and Little Grebe. The latter used to nest in the reeds on the river bank.

There have been changes in the river itself. Five to six years ago there was an invasion of myriads of min-

ute shellfish, similar in shape to mussels. These had apparently worked up from the saltier water in lower reaches of the river. However some seasons of abundant winter rains seem to have cleansed these away and recently small fish (minnows) were seen in the now clearer water. Recently a turtle was seen lying over a sunny log in the river, apparently exhausted from egg laying. A few days later its nest was discovered a metre from the edge, but it had been dug out and the eggs destroyed, possibly by a fox.

The past year (1998) has been rather disastrous for breeding. Two pairs of Shelducks obviously nesting, failed to produce young - in previous years they had clutches of 9 - 14. Pied Stilts nested unsuccessfully too and the number of Pacific Black ducklings were no more than 2 - 3 per clutch. One pair of Teal produced nine progeny, cared for diligently by both parents 'till they were full grown.

The decline in numbers of water birds in the area under patrol may mean that they have sought a more abundant food supply else-

(Continued on page 8)

Avon Patrol

by Dorine Morrow

(Continued from page 7)

where and a lack of pickings could reflect on the number, or lack of, young.

It would probably be a very useful exercise to monitor the quality of the water and do some analy-

sis of the amount of insect life found. During season of heavy winter rain there has been some erosion and undermining of banks but river couch soon establishes itself. The tree planting by the "Friends of

the River" should help to stabilize the banks; many of the trees are growing well.

Dorine Morrow

Toodyay, January 1999

History of the Central Avon River (cont)

by Jim Masters

(Continued from page 6)

the 1950's, much worse after the great flood of 1955. By then also outflow from the Northam sewerage system did not help one little bit in spite of farming lucerne there.

But for we now very old people who know the Avon River as it was sixty or more years ago it engendered in us a regard and respect for its many moods and the wonders of the wild-life it supports and still can do with care.

You would never learn this in a 'tiled' pool.

Jim R Masters

Glen Avon

28th November, 1998

volunteer working suggestions

Before you go out to work...

- 'slap on' sunscreen which is at least SPF15+, water resistant, applied 20 minutes before going out, and reapply every 2 hours
- wear appropriate clothing for the day, such as closed-in shoes or boots, hats, long sleeved shirts and gardening gloves
- take along your own drinking water
- wear sunglasses

While you are working...

- if you injure yourself or someone else, let the convener of the day know immediately
- if you find a syringe, pick it up by the blunt end (using your gloves) and place it into a plastic container, such as a cool drink bottle, replace the lid and put it into a rubbish bin
- make sure you have plenty to drink if working in the heat
- be aware of others working around you
- be on the lookout for broken glass and snakes

Information supplied as a public service by the Department of Environmental Protection