

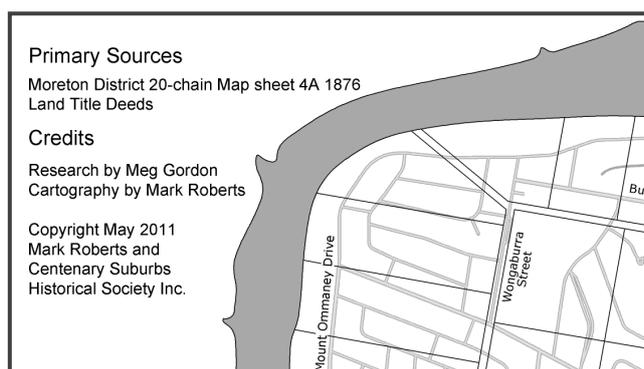
Murna Street's Historic Fig Tree

If the Moreton Bay Fig Tree in a small park off Murna St Jindalee could speak, it would have many tales to tell – tales of human social activities, of a huge flood, and tales of adversity, injury, impending destruction then of rescue of the tree.

The historic Fig Tree (*Ficus macrophyllus*) and the small park in which it is situated can be accessed via a path between nos. 3 and 7 Murna St Jindalee. The tree is believed to have been present when the area was first settled in 1864-5. A Brisbane City Council Tree Surgeon who examined the tree in about 2002 as a result of it having developed a serious split expressed the view that it was then about 170 or 180 years old.

From early colonial times, the tree has provided a shady outdoor recreation spot for successive generations of local residents and visitors. It has always been on public property. For over a hundred years, from 1864, the tree site was on a public access lane to the river. Such access lanes to the river were essential to farmers without riverside properties in the days when goods were taken to market by river. The fig tree grew close to the western boundary of the lane, overhanging the farmland on the western side.

This lane is shown on the earliest Survey Plans and maps. The lane ran from the corner of



Wongahura St and Burrendah Road at approximately a 45 degree angle to the present Murna St and reached the river approximately where the Jindalee Sea Scouts hut used to be (see section of overlay map 2 by Mark Roberts, reproduced from our book *When River Was Roadway* for the position of this lane: modern roads are shown in lighter shade of grey).

German pioneers Franz and Maria Frederika Walz owned the land bordering the lane on the west, and raised their large family in a home close by between the early 1870s and 1893. No doubt it would have been a favourite climbing tree for local children at the time. The first owner of the neighbouring land to the Walz farm, Thomas Logan, named his farm Fig-Tree Farm: this suggests that Moreton Bay fig trees may have been common in the locality in the late 1860s-70s. When the 1893 flood, whose level was considerably higher than the 1974 and 2011 floods, threatened the Walz home and the tree, the family evacuated and never returned to live at the site.

In pre-suburban mid-20th century, the tree provided shade for day trippers and picnickers on sight-seeing excursions to the Seventeen Mile Rocks farming district. The image below (courtesy of Gordon family) shows the Fig Tree viewed from the driveway of 85 Mt Ommaney Drive in about 1967-8 – after suburban development commenced but before any houses had been built adjacent to the tree.



When housing development focused on the western end of Jindalee, the developers recognised the tree's potential as a promotional feature in parkland. The area around the tree was set aside as public land with 7 house allotments backing onto the small park that was created. The developers built a wooden seat and a concrete path around the trunk of the tree.



A man, woman, child and a dog were brought to the site for publicity purposes and the dog's pawprint was set in the concrete path. The photograph opposite, taken on this occasion, was used by L.J. Hooker in the promotional material for Jindalee Chase.

Despite the tree being a central feature of the promotion, it is said that L.J. Hooker stipulated that the tree would have to be removed once houses had been built. However this appears to have been

overlooked by Council and the tree remained.

Residents backing onto the park and those from nearby streets recall many happy and festive occasions in the park in the last part of the 20th century. These included a wedding of the daughter of one of the local families.

Threats to the Fig Tree

There have been two serious threats to the tree's existence in the last 12 years. In 1999, Council planned to sell the park as private property as part of the Centenary Riverside Parks Development Strategy. This was a result of change in policy about siting of parks. A timely protest to Council by the local environment group, then known as CRAC and now as CDEA

Inc, resulted in the plan to sell the park being revised and it continues to be Brisbane City Council property.

One side of the Fig Tree sustained significant damage from a lightning strike about nine years



later. The image taken over a year later by Caroline Hamilton shows the damage to one side of the tree. Early in 2008 a sign was erected announcing the Council's intention to remove the tree and nearby residents were notified. A Council arborist had made the recommendation that the tree be removed as it was in poor condition and a safety risk.

Again, the members of the Centenary & District Environment Group protested. CDEA Inc took it up with then councillor Felicity Farmer, pointing out that tree restoration measures - such as cessation of mowing and mulching to the drip line instead, watering and pruning - were possible but did not appear to have been considered. In February 2008 Felicity Farmer successfully

negotiated with the relevant section of Council to suspend removal of the tree until an independent arborist's report had been obtained. The Tree Doctor was commissioned to provide this. As a result of this timely action, the Council plans to remove the tree were changed to plans to restore it.



However, on 1 April 2008 at 7.52am, a member of the CDEA Inc and of the Centenary Suburbs Historical Society received an alarming email from local residents in Cobbadah St:

‘Workmen have arrived to cut down the FIG TREE’. CDEA Inc again acted immediately, contacting the local councillor Matthew Bourke – who was newly elected and in the very first day of his new role. Matthew negotiated on site with the workmen to suspend work while he took up the issue with Council. Unfortunately there had been a re-structuring of responsibilities within Council and the section newly responsible for the park had not been advised about the decision to retain the tree.



It was decided that the tree would be retained but that some measures would be taken to reduce public risk and restore the tree. These included: removal of all large lateral branches back to the stem; mulching to the drip line and planting up to reduce access to the tree; and annual monitoring to check for any additional sign of decay. The tree had also suffered considerably from lack of water during the long drought and improved noticeably after rain. Lopping was undertaken in

2008. By March 2009 the tree was looking better even though the mulching had not yet been undertaken. The above photo by Caroline Hamilton was taken in March 2009. Mulching was subsequently carried out.

The tree was still flourishing in September 2012 as shown in the image opposite taken by Claire Wilson.



The Historical Society would like to hear from residents or former residents of the locality who are willing to share stories and/or photos of events under and near the tree. For our contact details, see ‘About the Society’.



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