

Wolston Creek Bushland Reserve - Its Past and Pioneers

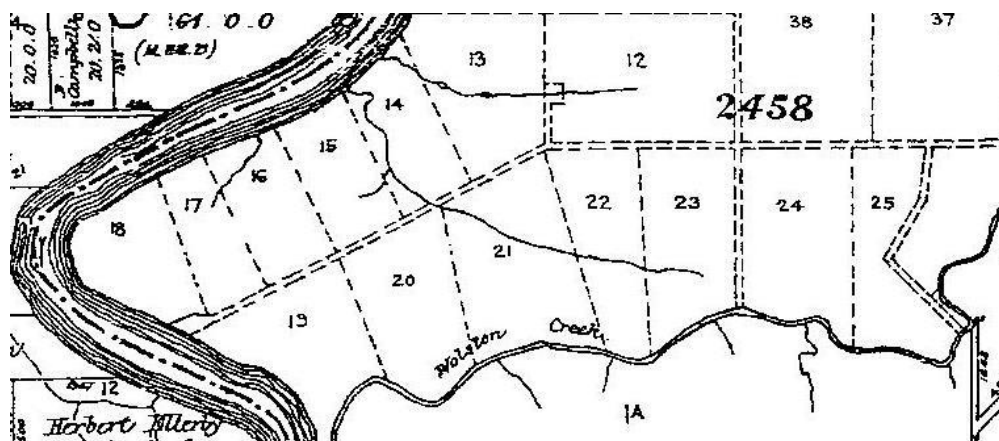
The land that comprises the Wolston Creek Bushland Reserve was transferred from the State Government to Brisbane City Council in 2003, to be used as parkland. Prior to that, it had a long and varied history of land usage. This article provides an overview of that history and the people whose names have been most strongly associated with pioneering the land in the area.

Grazing Period, 1852-1901 approx. The area's first major usage by Europeans was for grazing purposes (horses and beef cattle) by **Stephen Simpson**, the first owner of Wolston Estate, and also by the second owners, two generations of the **Matthew Buscall Goggs** family. Initially the land on the northern side of the creek was available only as leasehold from the Government but Stephen Simpson was influential in some blocks on the north side, adjacent to the creek and the river, being surveyed and auctioned as freehold in 1855. In that year, Simpson became the first owner of part of the land now occupied by the reserve, a 241-acre block at the mouth of Wolston Creek and the Brisbane River. Brown and Moffat bought the adjacent land along the creek but Simpson bought it from them in 1857 and continued to work it as part of the Wolston horse-breeding and grazing enterprise.

Sadly, in the midst of this expansion of land, Stephen's great-nephew **John Mansel Ommanney** died in March 1856 as a result of a horse-riding accident. The exact location is not known but the evidence indicates that the accident occurred on the southern bank of Wolston Creek, probably toward Wacol Station Road.

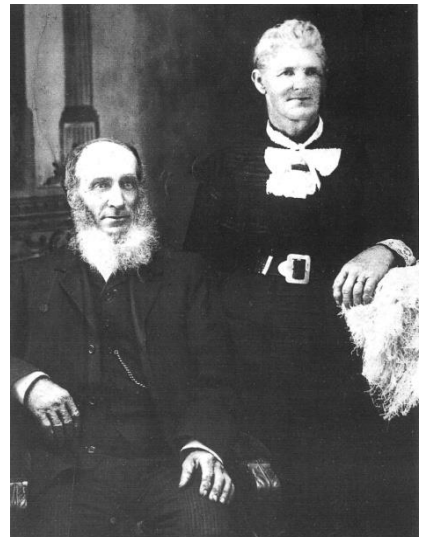
Transition to Dairy Farming and Mixed Farming: 1901 - 1960. By the late 19th century, Wolston Estate was struggling financially. A dairy farming enterprise commenced on the south side, adjacent to the creek. In 1901, the whole of Wolston Estate was subdivided and put up for sale. From then until the end of the 1950s, the 640-acre block on the south side of the creek was purchased and worked, first by the Grindle family and later by the Hurley family, as a large dairy farm. It was then acquired by the State Government and a low security Prison Farm was established. This included a world class dairy farm and artificial insemination facilities, market gardens, piggery, bakery and metal shop, all with the intention of providing training for and rehabilitating prisoners.

In 1901, the land along the north side of the creek, between the river and Wacol Station Road, had been subdivided into seven blocks that were marketed separately. Land title deeds reflect changing ownership over the years; and also at times, two or more blocks were held by one owner.



The Bielbys of Bennington Farm. William and Agnes Bielby, immigrants from Yorkshire, were significant pioneers of the area on the north side of the creek. William had worked for Matthew Goggs junior in preparing Wolston Estate for sale. He purchased one of the seven creekside subdivisions, no. 20, in 1904 and later acquired three adjacent subdivisions (21-23), the property being known as Bennington Farm. The Bielbys lived on the farm in Sumners Road with their family. They owned all but one of their original four blocks until 1939.

Sumner Family. Sumners Road takes its name from the owner of the block (no. 19) that included the mouth of the creek and was adjacent to the river between Sumners Road and the creek. The Sumner family also owned two blocks (15 and 16) opposite it, on the northern side of Sumners Road. Dick Sumner was an early pineapple grower in the Zillmere area who also established the first pineapple cannery in Brisbane. During the 1920s, he and his son George engaged Jimmy Low to clear the land on Sumners Road and Wolston Creek and to plant pineapples and bananas. The Sumners did not live on the land though there was a house on it that seems to have been occupied by different people over the years. The land finally passed out of Sumner hands in 1939 when the **Bishop** family of Darra acquired it and held it for 17 years, with some of the family living there.



William and Agnes Bielby



Sadie Low

Sadie Low, Jimmy Low and Percy Haines.

Jimmy Low purchased one of the Wolston Creek blocks, no. 21, from William Bielby. Jimmy and his wife Sadie moved on to it, living in a hut that Jimmy built. Unfortunately, Jimmy died in 1934 as a result of a motor vehicle accident, leaving Sadie to raise five children. Sadie was an enterprising, strong and hard-working woman. She is said to have been able to cut timber as well as any man. To keep the family afloat, she grew and sold vegetables, also ran a dairy for a while, sold fence posts and undertook fencing for neighbours. She also sold lantana mulch for potted plants and undertook ironing for the U.S. Army (across the creek in Wacol during WW2). Later, Sadie met Percy Haines, a blacksmith. Percy built a new house on the block. Sadie and Percy had five children of whom four lived to adulthood. Percy worked at the Darra Cement Co. while living on Sumners Road and operated a smithery on weekends. He established a small coal mine on

block 21 to obtain fuel for his forge. Sadie remained on the farm until about 1960 when she sold to Hooker-Rex, the developer of Centenary Estates.



The wrecked Gebbs house, November 1940

John Gebbs, a Swiss immigrant, purchased William Bielby's first block of land (no. 20) in 1939. He grew mainly lucerne. A wild storm in November 1940 brought the house down with Mr Gebbs trapped inside. Mr Gebbs was not able to get free as his left arm was pinned down by a beam. Neighbours freed him and summoned an ambulance. He sustained a broken arm.

This house is believed to have been the original house built by William Bielby. Subsequently, the neighbours built a shack for John Gebbs.

Daniel ('John') and Edward Maurer. From 1942 until about 1960, the Bielby-Gebs land (no. 20), where the house was located, was owned successively by two Maurer brothers. They had been raised in the nearby area, being sons of German immigrants who had been 19th century pioneers of the former Seventeen Mile Rocks farming district. Edward Maurer, accompanied by his wife and youngest daughter and son, owned and worked the farm from 1950. The family lived in a shed while Edward, assisted by his brothers, built a new house with timber that he felled himself and had taken to the local sawmill to be cut. The shack built by neighbours for John Gebs was retained for use by the Maurer extended family when visiting. Market crops were grown on the river flats and the family also had some dairy cattle. Edward worked at the Darra Cement Works as well as running the farm because the farm itself did not generate sufficient profit to support the family.

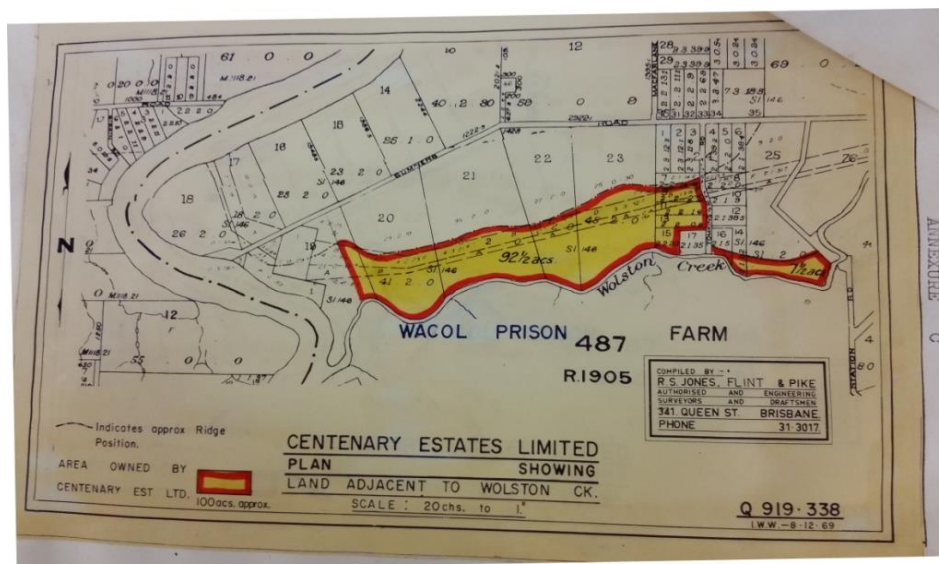


Edward Maurer

Other owners/workers of the creekside blocks include **Mr and Mrs Boon** (who acquired portions 22 and 23 after the Bielby era and operated a dairy farm); **Mr Fedora** (portion 24) and **Sunny Harrison** (portion 25).

The End of Small Farms: 1960 - 1999. Hooker-Rex acquired the various farms along Wolston Creek in 1960-62. An early Centenary Estates Plan shows the blocks along the creek being primarily designated for an industrial estate, always an integral part of the Centenary Estates concept, in order to provide local employment. Provision was made for an electricity sub-station on the former Sumner land, and a small park between that and the industrial estate. The electricity sub-station was installed in 1961.

However, that was not the end of the farming era. Hooker Rex had proposed that the creekside land between Wacol Station Road and the river be included in the proposed Sumner industrial estate. In 1971, the Government, concerned to protect its irrigation water supply from the creek, acquired the lower sections of portions 20-23, and smaller sections of 19, 24 and 25 and expanded the **Prison Farm** that operated on the south side of the creek. The plan below shows the proposed annexation of land for the Prison Farm in red.



At least one bridge was built across Wolston Creek during this time, to allow livestock and farmhands to move between the sections of the farm south and north of the creek: see Google Earth image below. The Prison Farm, both north and south of the creek, continued operating until its closure in 1999.



As a result, the industrial estate was confined to the other side of Wacol Station Road, to become known as Summer Park. The Centenary Estates developers then subdivided the upper sections of blocks 20-25, mostly for residential allotments, including streets and amenities, to become part of Riverhills.

Early residents of Riverhills interacted amicably with the prisoners working the farm on the lower section of the blocks. In summer, some residents used to slip in to the farm to swim in the dam that had been installed in the lower area. One family has a photograph of their granddaughter being given a ride on a horse by a prisoner.

Today, a remnant of the Prison Farm period can be seen in the uniform style of chain wire back fence that is shared by many of the houses that back onto the park. In addition to entering the Prison Farm for swimming and interactions with farm workers, some residents whose homes backed onto the reserve had been in the habit of climbing over the fence to mow along the outside, to prevent grass from the farm encroaching their yards. The Prison Farm authorities proposed installing a high fence along the backs of the private properties but residents objected. A standard height chain wire fence was then installed by the Prison Farm, with a concrete strip along the bottom to prevent grass from the farm encroaching onto private properties. This fence was erected alongside the existing back fences (later removed) of private properties, resulting in a small gain of land by those properties.

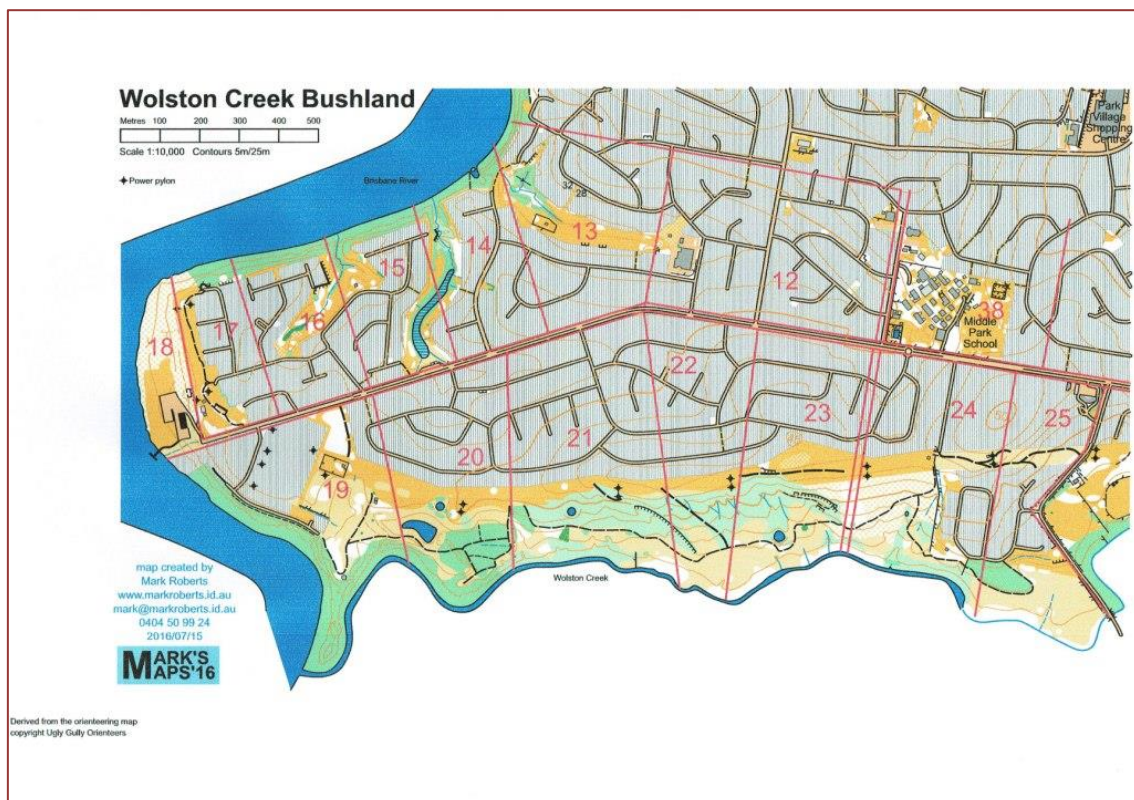
Some old fence posts, some small heaps of concrete rubble from tank stands and a broken concrete slab over a former cattle dip are the sole visible remains of the farming era.

Creation of the Reserve. [We are grateful to Shealagh Walker of CDEA Inc for the information in this section 'Creation of the Reserve'].

Community groups, the Brisbane City Council and the local State Member were all involved in the creation of the reserve. A group called Concerned Residents Against More Prisons (CRAMP) initiated by Warner Dakin, who had managed to have the proposed Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre and Wolston Correctional Centre moved from the prison farm reserve to an area on the opposite side of Grindle Road in 1997, were very involved in saving the former Prison Farm land on the north side of the creek land as open space. CRAMP made submissions to and worked closely with Julie Attwood, the member for the Mt Ommaney electorate, to save the land as parkland.

At the same time, the Centenary Riverfront Advisory Committee, CRAC (now CDEA Inc.) took part in a Brisbane City Council project investigating potential public parklands between Blackheath Road in Oxley, in a strip within 500 metres of the Brisbane River bank, to Wolston Creek, Riverhills. Members formed sub-committees to look into possible locations and uses. One area CRAC recommended for public open space was the former prison farm land on the north side of Wolston Creek.

In 2003 the land comprising 56 hectares was transferred from the State Government to the Brisbane City Council for parkland. The area on the former Summer block 19 that was designated as a small park by Centenary Estates was also incorporated in the reserve. A Bushcare group was formed later that year. Mark Roberts' map below, with overlay showing the early 20th century property boundaries, illustrates how the reserve, part of Riverhills residential suburb and the electricity sub-station have replaced the pre-development farms. (Courtesy of Mark Roberts: www.markroberts.id.au)



Meg Gordon, Centenary Suburbs Historical Society Inc., July 2017.

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