

## Wolston Creek Bushland - the Decline and Rise of Native Vegetation

This article is drawn from and builds on a Brisbane City Council-commissioned presentation by Centenary Suburbs Historical Society at a BCC-hosted event at Wolston Creek Bushland Reserve in August 2016. The brief for a social history and history of land usage included a specific request to examine the question of why the native vegetation had been cleared, necessitating the bushland restoration that has occurred in the Reserve in recent years. This article addresses this issue.

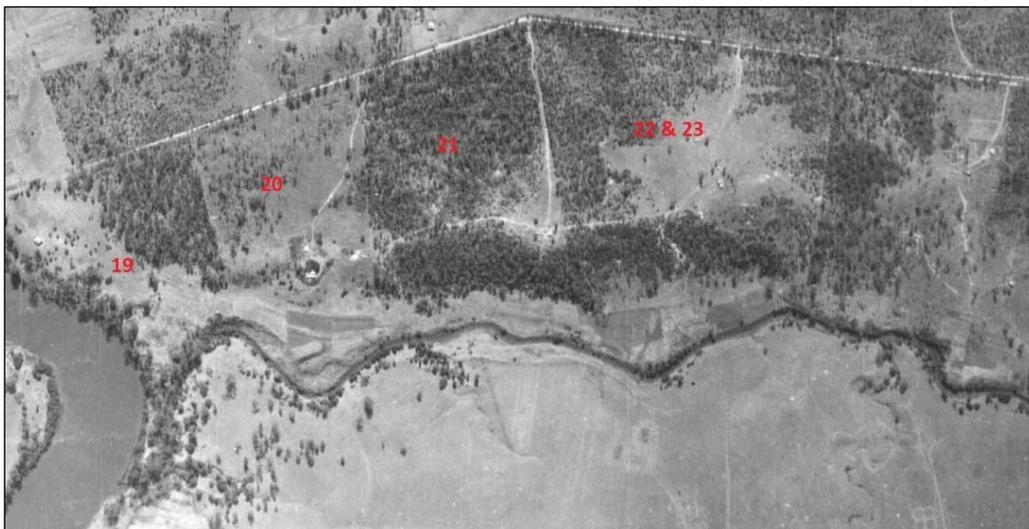
As there is little documented history about the decline of native vegetation, the article draws together and analyses available evidence and suggests possible conclusions about the reasons for the decline. The complementary article 'Wolston Creek Bushland Reserve - Its Past and Pioneers' provides the historical context for this description and interpretation of the loss and gradual return of native vegetation along the creek in the area west of Wacol Station Road. See <https://cshsoc.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/wolston-creek-bushland-reserve-jul-2017.pdf>

### Timing of Significant Losses in Native Vegetation

In the 19th century, the land both north and south of the creek was part of Wolston Estate, primarily used for horse breeding and cattle grazing. However, there is no strong evidence that significant clearing had occurred in the western Wolston Creek area before the end of the century.

A traveller who visited Wolston in 1859 wrote that there were about 1000 acres of open forest, neatly fenced with horses running on it. In 1892, the Field Naturalists group from Brisbane, led by F.M. Bailey, the Colonial Botanist, had a highly successful excursion to Wolston Creek. The report of the excursion in the *Brisbane Courier* illustrates that scrub existed on the banks and that the party explored the scrub for a mile and a half from the creek's mouth. Many more varieties of native plants were noted while rowing back along the creek. The report concluded: "Lovers of the beautiful cannot do better than visit Woolston [sic] Creek. It will prove a perfect harvest to artists and amateur photographers."

Yet the earliest aerial photograph of the section of Wolston Creek now occupied by the Bushland Reserve shows a creek almost devoid of vegetation along its banks. This 1944 RAAF aerial photograph also illustrates the varying level of clearing on each of the farm blocks (identified by the original portion numbers superimposed in red), in the higher parts. On the south side of the creek, the land had been extensively cleared both close to and away from the creek.



What influenced the loss of native vegetation in the whole area? And in particular, what brought about the loss of creekside vegetation between 1892 and 1944? And why the varying levels of clearing of areas farther away from the creek, on the north side? It appears that there were multiple and varying influences.

## The Demand for Timber

Some clearing had occurred on Wolston Estate for the purpose of encouraging growth of grass for livestock, for a fruit orchard, farm buildings and some (limited) crops. However, this clearly had not resulted in loss of the scrub along the creek as the 1892 Field Naturalists' article testifies. And there was sufficient native forest in late 1903 for the Wolston Estate auctioneers to advertise a tender for brushing and ringbarking of 3000 acres of bushland. This would have included most if not all of the subdivisions on the northside of Wolston Creek. Whether this advertised ring-barking went ahead, and how extensively, is not on record.

Timber was much in demand, all over Brisbane, for building purposes in the 19th century and well into the 20th century, as population expanded. From early colonial times, timber-getters had been obtaining timber in the outer western riverside suburbs but gradually had to go farther afield as supplies of good construction timber ran out.

Scotts Sawmill was established in Darra in 1917. The late Bob Eason, of Darra and Sumners Rd, worked as a timber-getter for many years. This included felling of trees in the Riverhills area. Some large trees were still being felled in the local area in the 1940s but Bob advised that most of the good timber in the area had gone by about 1950. An exception was a property at the end of Sumners Road that Bob acquired in the 1950s. Bob advised that in 1959, he cut and sold 150,000 superfeet of blue gum to Scotts Sawmill. However, his brother Jack's property next door had already been extensively cleared for farming.



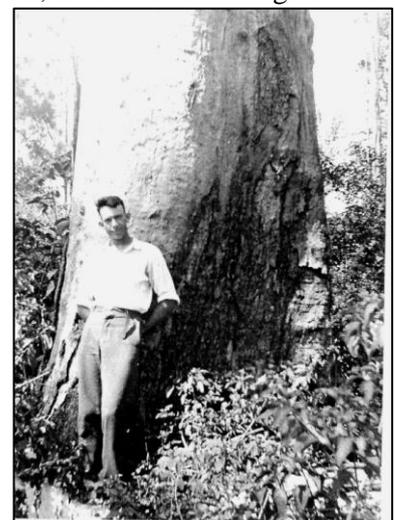
*Above: Bob Eason (left) with mate, and a log felled locally*

In addition to timber for construction, timber was also needed as fuel. For example, Sadie Low, a resident of one of the creekside blocks, sold wattle from her property to the bakery at Darra, as fuel for their large ovens.

During the farming era, timber on properties was also felled for the purpose of making fence posts, and for building houses and sheds on farms. This is illustrated by the fate of the large tree in the photograph opposite, on Bob Eason's land at the end of Sumners Road. Edward Maurer felled it, had it milled at Darra sawmill along with timber he had felled on his own property, and used it to build a new house for his family.

### Clearing for Farming Purposes

The motivation for clearing of the original 640-acre Wolston block on the south side of the creek appears to have been to establish a dairy farm. The property was converted from grazing to dairying at the end of the 19th century and operated as a dairy farm until sold to the State Government in 1959. A low security Prison Farm was then established. Dairy farming



continued along with intensive cultivation of crops. Successive aerial photographs taken during the Prison Farm period demonstrate that the property was virtually totally cleared until the Prison Farm's closure in 1999.

**Creekside vegetation.** The year after the Field Naturalists' 1892 excursion, Wolston Creek and surrounding areas were extensively flooded by the devastating 1893 floods, higher than any flood that has occurred since. While no description has been found of the impact in that particular area, Wacol was under water - this would have been due to water backing up along Wolston Creek and its tributaries. Successive floods since have illustrated that creekside vegetation, particularly smaller plants, suffers considerably. Another flood, but very considerably lower, occurred in 1931.

The major influence on the clearing, however, was the changed needs of the human owners of the land. When Wolston Estate was subdivided and sold as small farms in the early 20th century, the new owners of the small farms were heavily reliant on growing crops for home use and for market. The alluvial soil along the banks was of much better quality than the poor soil on the ridge where growing crops and fruit on any scale was prohibitive. Creekside crops on the 7 blocks between the junction with Brisbane River and Wacol Station Road varied from block to block. Considered overall, crops included pineapples, bananas, lucerne, maize, sweet potatoes and a variety of vegetables; and, on one block, cotton.

**Varying clearing levels of higher sections of farms along Wolston Creek.** As already noted, the level of clearing of the upper sections of the farms varied. The 1944 aerial photograph shows that the most extensive clearing had occurred on portion 20, the centre of the former Bielby farm. It is possible that Mr Bielby, first purchaser of portion 20 and engaged by Matthew Goggs to prepare Wolston Estate for sale, benefited from the advertised tender for clearing in Dec. 1903. In any case, he established a dairy farm and needed to clear the land significantly to support his dairy farm as well as the food and market crops that he grew on the alluvial creekside flats. Likewise, later owners of portion 20, the Maurer family, and of portions 22 and 23 (the Boon family) needed to keep land cleared for dairying as well as for market crops.

On the other hand, one of the few remaining stands of mature forest in the late 1950s was on portion no. 19, the former Sumner land. Miss Tess Maurer, whose family owned the neighbouring portion 20 during the 1940s and 1950s, recalls a significant area of mature forest on portion 19 adjacent to the Maurer farm. And today, there are still very mature blue gum, some considered to be 250-300 years old, on the riverside fringe



*Sadie Low in later life*

of this block. A possible reason for this is that the long-term owners of portion no. 19 were not reliant on the land as a significant contribution to their livelihood. It was owned by Sumners for many years but their residence was on the north side of Brisbane and their primary income was well supplied through other occupations. The next owners were the Darra bakers, the Bishop family, who bought it as a retirement residence and they held it for about 16 years. Neighbours of the time do not recall the Bishops having made any significant use of the land for crops or cattle. The next owners, Mr and Mrs Burgess, held it for only 4 years before Hooker Rex acquired it. This ownership history may account for the more limited clearing of timber on that block.

Portion no. 21 was owned by Sadie Low. But while Sadie had some dairy cattle, dairy farming was not as big a venture as it was for some other farmers along the creek. Sadie lost her husband early and supported the family alone, engaging in diverse income generation activities for quite a number of years. This included growing crops on the alluvial creekside soil. Her second partner

Percy Haines worked at the Darra Cement Co. and ran a small blacksmithery at weekends, from another property. This social history may account for the fact that the block was not subject to as much clearing as the others were.

## **Impact of a growing population**

The last wave of clearing on the upper parts of the former Wolston Creek farms (north side of creek) commenced with the initiation of the Centenary Estates project. Hooker Rex, the company that spearheaded the development, acquired the properties along the creek about 1960-1961. An allocation of land was made for a sub-station and subdivisions were made for an easement for the electricity pylons. Expansion in electricity infrastructure was driven by the increased Brisbane population and increased usage of electricity (for electrical appliances in the home, etc), not only because of the impending Centenary Suburbs development. A 1971 aerial photograph shows that the sub-station and pylons had been installed by then, the installation having involved a wide band of clearing from west to east.

Centenary Estates then went ahead with expansion of the Riverhills suburb on the south side of Sumners Road. The early stages of construction can be seen in the aerial photograph below, while the land closer to the creek was still being operated as part of the Prison Farm's dairying enterprise.

For more information on this aspect of the history, and the creation of the reserve, see the complementary article ['Wolston Creek Bushland Reserve - Its Past and Pioneers'](#).



*1978 Aerial photo showing the clearing for electricity pylons and early stages of street installation.*

## **Conclusions regarding Decline of Native Vegetation**

The above review indicates that the history of vegetation along Wolston Creek between Wacol Station Rd and the mouth of the creek reflects changing community needs and values over time. The needs of struggling farmers for useable land, the timber industry, Prison Farm activities, and finally, developments responding to the needs of a growing population each contributed to the decline of native vegetation.

## **Return of Native Bushland**

Since the creation of the reserve and formation of a Bushcare group in 2003, various initiatives have contributed to the greatly increased areas of bushland along that section of Wolston Creek.

In 2008, 7000 trees were planted for the BCC and Australian Lung Foundation as a memorial to the 7000 people who die from cancer each year. A plaque - unveiled 16 November 2008 - can be seen toward the western end of the reserve.

Additionally, since that time, other initiatives have contributed to the expansion of native bushland. The current coordinator of the Reserve's Bushcare Group, Julie Vejle, advised that the reserve benefited from BCC Wipe-out-weeds program (circa 2008-2012) and BCC 2 Million Trees program, which planted an estimated 50,000 trees (2008-2014).

Since 2012, the ongoing Wolston Creek Bushland Reserve Restoration Project (run by the Bushcare group) has successfully sought regular grant funding for weed control from various local and state sources. Funding

for this project is used to pay for discriminate weed control by Council Approved Contractors. Applications for funding are coordinated by Wolston Creek Bushcare Group with the assistance of BCC support officers from BCC's Community Conservation Partnership Program, and supported by Wolston and Centenary Catchments and Brisbane Catchments Network.

Meg Gordon, Centenary Suburbs Historical Society Inc.  
(based on research undertaken in 2016 and early 2017).

All pages on this website remain the property of the Centenary Suburbs Historical Society. Please contact us ([centenaryhistory2@hotmail.com](mailto:centenaryhistory2@hotmail.com)) if you would like to use our images or articles.



Centenary Suburbs Historical Society Photo Gallery and Articles by [Centenary Suburbs Historical Society](#) are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Australia License](#). Based on a work at [www.cshsoc.org.au](http://www.cshsoc.org.au).