

GOING WITH THE FLOW

WINDING ITS WAY AROUND THE BEND AT FLEMINGTON RACECOURSE BEFORE JOINING THE YARRA, THE MARIBYRNONG RIVER TELLS AN IMPORTANT STORY ABOUT THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF MELBOURNE.

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The first Melbourne Cup was held on the flats beside the Maribyrnong River in 1861. Crowds gathered at the banks and on the nearby hills, or watched from small boats on the water. Today, the river continues to play an important part in the culture of Flemington, with many racegoers choosing to arrive by boat, sipping champagne and nibbling on appetisers as they watch the city skyline and the picturesque parks and gardens slowly drift past. Along the way, they are witness to a rich scattering of historical sites and relics, which together tell a story of the development and history of Melbourne that twists along as the river bends.

Flowing from the slopes of Mount Macedon, the Maribyrnong River winds through Melbourne's west, passing through suburbs including Keilor, Sunshine, Essendon and Footscray before flowing into the Yarra near Port Melbourne. Though often dismissed as Melbourne's 'other river', it is one of the city's largest, stretching for 130km and



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with a catchment of over 1400 sq km. As the river meanders into the built-up area of Melbourne, it slowly transitions from a tranquil body of water to a vibrant, multi-purpose river valley that plays a significant role in the cultural fabric of the city.

The valued place of the river in Melbourne's history stretches back to more than 40,000 years ago. Long before the arrival of European settlers, the Maribyrnong River Valley was home to the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and today contains some of Australia's most important Aboriginal archaeological sites. For the indigenous inhabitants of the land, the river was a rich source of drinking water and food, flourishing with fish and eels, and with plenty of possums, waterbirds and edible plants along the banks. Kangaroos and emus could also be found on the great basalt plains, ready to be hunted.

Along with providing food and water, the river served as a passage for travel by canoe and was a source of construction materials. Outcrops of hard rock, called silcrete, were formed from

weathered basalt and quarried for the production of small stone implements. Today, 11 Aboriginal silcrete quarries can still be seen along the river and its tributaries, the most visible being near the Lily Street lookout in Essendon West.

The first Europeans to explore along the river are thought to have been Charles Grimes in 1803 and John Batman in 1835, the year Melbourne township was settled. In the early settlement of Melbourne, the river formed a natural boundary from the western grazing lands, and the banks provided docking for trading ships. It became known as Saltwater River, due to the tidal nature of its lower reaches to Solomon's Ford in Avondale Heights, where sheep runs were established. From the beginning, the river played an important part in the development of the city, and it continued to influence the rapid industrial growth over the next 150 years. Horses arrived at the settlement in the first year,

brought over from Tasmania by pioneer John Pascoe Fawkner. Soon after, the first horseraces in Melbourne were held, sparking a fever for racing that continued to rise. The first official racemeeting took place in 1838 at Batman's Hill near Spencer Street, and it wasn't long before racing organisers decided to find a permanent location. The current Flemington Racecourse site was selected, and in 1840 the first official race was held on the river flats beside the Maribyrnong.

Racing continued to flourish with the gold rush of the 1850s, which brought a huge influx of people to the area. By the second half of the 19th century, the Maribyrnong River had become home to much of Melbourne's industry. Canneries, pipe works, paint factories, sugar refineries and fertiliser plants all lined the riverbanks, bringing



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abundant opportunities for employment. Unfortunately, this meant that large amounts of liquid waste and fumes polluted the river and the surrounding environments, turning it almost into a sewer. In dry summers the river often completely ceased to flow, and the filthy water and noxious air helped give 'Marvellous Melbourne' its alternate nickname: 'Marvellous Smellbourne'.

A local push for the removal of some trades in the early 1900s made some improvement to the river environment, though the growth of the chemical and defence industries leading up to the First World War counteracted much of the progress. In 1906 the Essendon River League was formed, with the intention of cleaning up the river. The League lobbied for land along the river to be reserved, initiated tree-planting programs and raised funds for drainage improvements and recreational facilities such



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PRE-HISTORY

BATS, SUGAR GLIDERS, KOALAS, ECHIDNAS, KANGAROOS, WOMBATS, POSSUMS AND WALLABIES CALL THE RIVER VALLEY HOME.

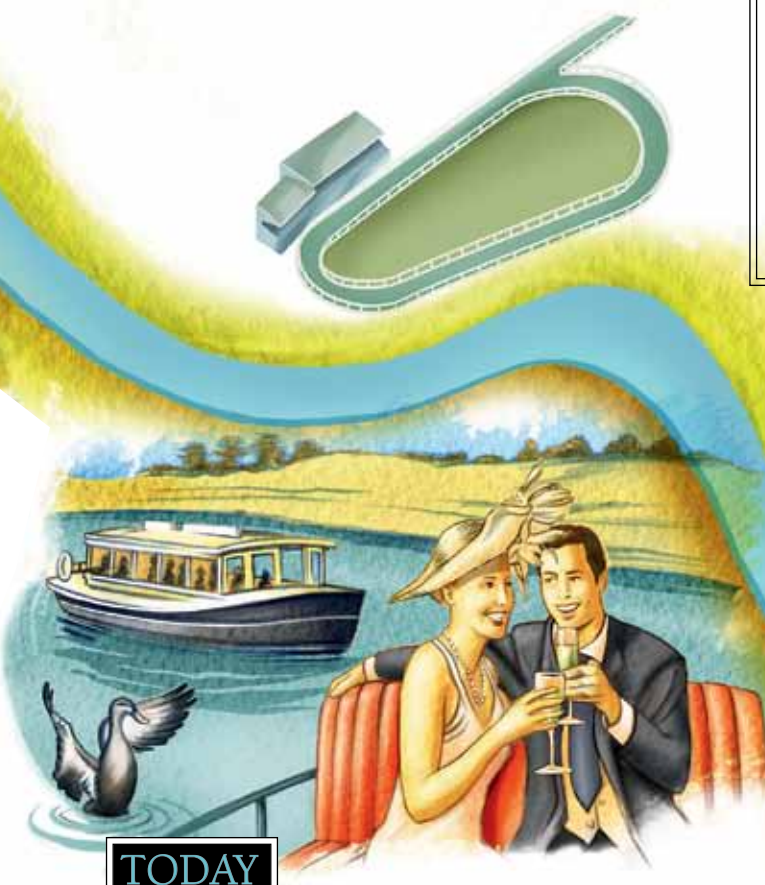
diverse population of native animals, and as successful revegetation along the river lengths has been completed, the numbers are again flourishing. “They’re coming back because the water quality is improving, partly because of the replanting of the river valley,” Somerville says.

More than 10 species of native fish, eight of exotic fish, and 12 of frogs and toads can currently be found in the river, and waterbirds such as the Pacific Black Duck and Chestnut Teal are frequent visitors. Bats, sugar gliders, koalas, echidnas, kangaroos, wombats, possums and wallabies also call the river valley home. Local and exotic flora is also thriving, with native reserves along the river at Brimbank and diverse vegetation of trees and grasses particularly concentrated in areas like

Footscray Park and Maribyrnong Park.

This lush, natural environment provides vital breathing space away from the more industrialised areas around the valley. The riverside parks and wetlands are popular places for fishing and birdwatching, while facilities such as walking paths, bike paths and barbecue areas provide plenty of opportunities for recreation and relaxation for all ages.

Somerville says a continued commitment to keeping the river valley clean is essential for preserving



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as seats and a bandstand. They also succeeded in having the name changed in 1913 to Maribyrnong, derived from *mirring-gnay-bir-nong*, which is said to mean “I can hear a ringtail possum” in the local Woiwurrung language.

The move to bring back some of the river’s natural beauty and cleanliness continued after the next wave of heavy industrialisation between the two World Wars, sparking up again vehemently with the growing environmental awareness of the 1970s. Environmental activists successfully lobbied the government to fund initiatives to clean up the river and valley, and in 1984 a comprehensive Maribyrnong River Plan was launched. A local community group called Friends of the Maribyrnong Valley was established in 1986, and continues to play a vital role in the protection and rehabilitation of the river and valley, striving to raise public awareness of its value as a natural recreational resource.

Friends of the Maribyrnong Valley committee member Peter Somerville, OAM,

says the contribution of the local community has made a remarkable difference to the current state of the river. “If it wasn’t for volunteers, a lot of work wouldn’t have been done,” Somerville says. “The river, when it was known as the Saltwater, got a bad reputation, being a drain and a sewer. It was an industrial river valley with plenty of employment, but an environmental disaster. Now, its reputation has changed due to industries closing and having active Friends of the Maribyrnong Valley groups working with councils, government departments and other groups to remove weeds and promote revegetation of the valley.”

Somerville, who is also the vice-president of the Living Museum of the West at Pipemakers Park and the director of Maribyrnong River Cruises, says the improvement in the environment is clear in the return of many species of wildlife. The river is a passage for a

this public space for generations to come. “To maintain clean water and river banks we need to recycle water from drains and litter traps to stop surface rubbish coming in along the pathways,” he says. Next year marks the 100-year anniversary of the name change from Saltwater to Maribyrnong, and Somerville believes this occasion should be used to celebrate the river and its place in the Melbourne community. “I think the future of the river valley looks promising,” he says. 🐾