

Placemaking, history & heritage: Epping's new 'city in the suburbs'



Emma Russell, December 2020

New Epping, a 'city in the suburbs', is being 'masterplanned' for Melbourne's north. It promises a gracious and sustainable neighbourhood bisected by Edgars Creek with an 11-hectare public green spine of rehabilitated wetlands, flora and fauna. It's exciting. But what's also exciting is the inclusion of history and heritage in the making of this brand-new place.

Old stories give new places complexity and character

Historians are placemakers - we discover the array of layers, textures and legacies that go into making places so that today, those of us who live in, work in or wander through them can appreciate their peculiarities and characteristics. That was the task given to us earlier this year by the owners and developers of New Epping:

Riverlee wanted



'a history study that would be the bedrock for the tone of the development' and that would find the who, what, when, where, why and how.

So what did we find?



The site's natural features testify to ancient volcanic and human activity

Millenia ago nearby volcanic hills erupted and spewed vast quantities of lava down towards the bay (they are extinct now). The hot lava cooled to a hard-as-rock basalt plain across Melbourne's north and gave rise to vast swathes of open woodlands, low lying plants, swampy regions and multitudes of waterways, including the Merri, Darebin and Edgar's Creeks. In the 19th and 20th centuries this basalt was excavated, cut into bluestones, and used for the city's foundations.

This landscape suited migratory birds like the Whiskered Tern. The Golden Sun Moth, the Growling Grass Frog and other fauna also thrived here. Eels migrated downstream in Edgar's Creek every summer towards the bay on their way to the Coral Sea breeding grounds.

It supported the Wurundjeri willem, traditional custodians of country between the Maribyrnong River and the Darebin Creek. New Epping is in the south-east of Wurundjeri willem country.

We know the Wurundjeri willem have been living here for at least 35,000 years and surveyors' maps from 1855 plus recent bio-region mapping indicate a strong possibility that Indigenous fire management maintained the open grasslands so food and resources could be more readily harvested. River Red Gum bark was used for myriad reasons, murnong and other tubers were grown for food, and Edgars Creek eels were harvested during their late summer migrations.

A new kind of settlement

In the 1830s and '40s new settlers arrived and traversed the same waterways and pathways as the Wurundjeri willem, including Edgars Creek. But they fenced paddocks to graze cloven hooved animals new and damaging to Australian soils, cleared trees, constructed roads and built infrastructure including the village of Epping on the nearby Darebin Creek. They replaced a light hand with a heavy hand.

After 1863 most of the Wurundjeri willem, led by Simon Wonga (ca. 1824-1874), moved to Coranderrk to live with people from other Kulin nation language groups around Melbourne.

Epping, well into the 20th century, was more of a rural township just outside Melbourne than a suburb of Melbourne. Owned by the Crown but used by the community, there are remnants of a drystone wall in the north-east of the site and an adjacent ford over Edgars Creek. Local papers reported stock wandering the Creek and vacant land, invading nearby properties and halting traffic on Cooper Street. They were usually impounded, released after their owners paid a fine. When motor cars began aggressively competing for space they stopped wandering. The site remained open Crown land until 1965 and there are people today who well remember a clear view far to the west from High Street.

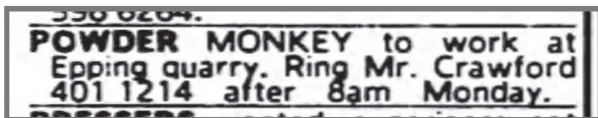


Industrial transformations

In 1965 the Alpha Quarrying Company bought the land, fenced it off, and blasted the bluestone out of the ground to crush into pieces for concrete, drainage systems, roads, railways and foundations across Melbourne.

This brutal industry was new but stone has been obtained or extracted from around the site for thousands of years; evidenced by the 77 Indigenous stone artefacts found in 15 locations within 2km of New Epping's creek.

I don't know if the Wurundjeri willem had a term for those who worked with stone but in the 1960s and '70s the classified advertisements call for Drillers, Jackhammer men and Powder Monkeys. This was not easy work and was often dangerous



This project is ongoing - If you have any knowledge of or familiarity with this site please get in touch - we'd love to chat and want to gather as much evidence as we can of who, what, when, where, why and how.

From bluestone to rubbish

By the 1980s the site was of a pattern that had developed across much of Melbourne's landscape for over a century - stone and clay quarries once essential for building and infrastructure having been used up, outlived their purpose, or become dangerous as suburbia encroached close to their gaping pits. Many have been filled, capped and used as parkland or for recreation and housing, some filled with water for local swimming holes or lakes, others set aside as council rubbish tips.

Epping Waste Disposal was established on site in 1984. The Landfill Area Caretaker conducted inspections, managed security breaches, maintained equipment, recorded water and leachate levels, removed weeds, oversaw the weighbridge, drove the garbage trucks and, because he lived there for over twenty years, had a house, a kitchen garden and a pets' graveyard.

Today the house is gone, the quarry holes have been filled and capped and it belongs to Riverlee as a 51-hectare brownfield site.

There isn't much to see.
But there is a lot to remember.

By commissioning a history study early the site's unique legacies, stories and peculiarities will be integrated into the design, development, way-finding and place-making. New residents, workers and visitors will be able to really know the place, appreciate its stories and so feel a connection. Stay tuned for how this works in New Epping as the development unfolds.

Images:

1. 'Plate 1. The activity area southern perspective showing extensive grassy area', CHMG, Cultural Heritage Management Plan, 2020, p.69
2. Drystone wall on site. Epping Renewal Site Development Plan, 10 July 2020, p.5
3. A typical stone quarry with a crusher. Jaques, 1962 Annual Report
4. The Age, advertisement for Powder Monkey, September 14, 1985, p.196
5. Edge Group, ESA Audit, New Epping site in 1987



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I'm an advocate for history's capacity to provide the sense of place, identity and connections we all need for a shared, positive future.