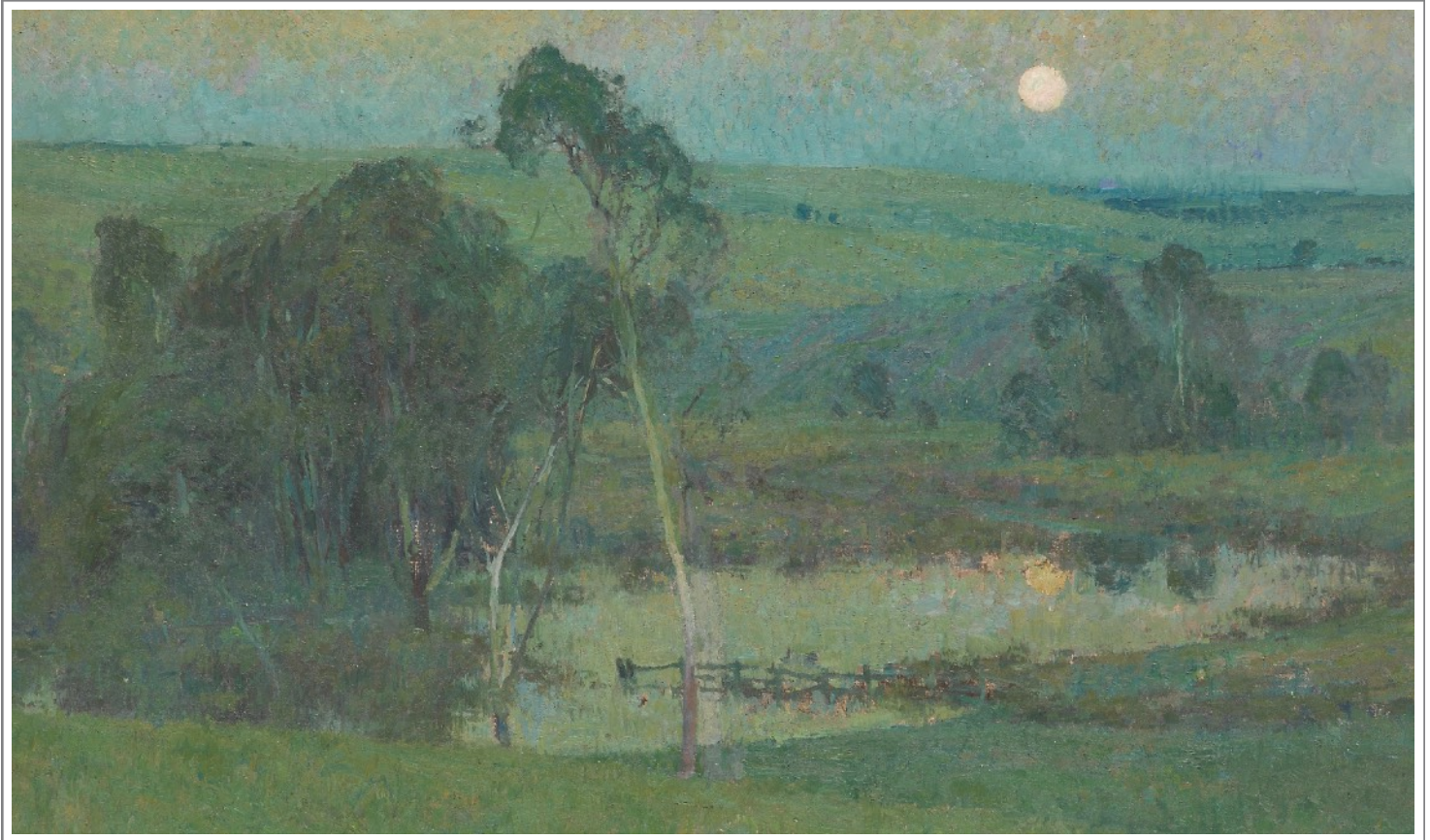


The rich history of the Phillips Fox Billabong and its surrounds



The Phillips Fox Billabong is named after the Australian Impressionist Artist Emanuel Phillips Fox. His etherial painting Moonrise depicts the billabong at dusk in 1900.

Koori heritage

Several hundred years before that a River Red Gum sprouted on the bank of the nearby Yarra River.

This tree provided food for generations of Koori, courtesy of its leaning nature making climbing it possible - aided by 13 steps carved into the almost two metre diameter trunk - to reach the hollows abounding in the heights of this very special icon of the region.

It is a noble reminder of the importance of this part of the Yarra Valley to the Koori as the Phillips Fox Billabong is just downstream of the Bolin Bolin billabongs which were a hub of culture for much of the Kulin Nation.



The "Stepped Tree"

White settlement

Within months of Batman and Fawkner establishing Melbourne in 1835 the area was taken over by sheep graziers, and the Koori were displaced.

In 1837 William Hoddle divided the land which was then sold off.

In 1839 David Charteris McArthur purchase 34 hectares for 350 pounds and established the 'Charterisville' estate which included the Phillips Fox Billabong. The land was cleared of most of its native vegetation and out-buildings, orchards, vineyards, market gardens and crops were established on the river flats next to the billabong.

McArthur was the Melbourne manager of the Bank of Australasia (forerunner of the ANZ Bank) one of the five original trustees of the Public Library of Victoria in 1853 and president of trustees of the Public Library, Museums and National Gallery of Victoria in 1880-83. At various times he was also chairman of the Austin Hospital, president of the Melbourne Cricket Club and Old Colonists' Association. One can assume that many of Victoria's aristocracy would have been guests of McArthur at Charterisville.

An artist's delight

However, the most famous of Charterisville's guests were the Impressionists of The Heidelberg School who stayed at Charterisville during the 1890's and painted their renowned works of the Australian landscape which they took out onto the world stage. Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin, Charles Conder, Jane Sutherland and Clara Southern were amongst those who probably strolled around the billabong, and amongst the vineyards that surrounded it then.

In 1887 McArthur died and Charterisville Estate was sold to John Ferguson and John Roberts who turned some of it into a dairy farm.

From 1890 to 1904 Walter Withers rented part of the house. Emanuel Phillip Fox along with Tudor St George Tucker ran an art school there from 1893 to 1901. Many renowned painters used it over this period including Norman Lindsay.

The Twentieth Century

The new century saw a steady decline of the estate and it was gradually carved up and parts sold off.

However, Charterisville House still stands 300m from the billabong at 77 Burke Road.

In 1912 a new chapter started for the billabong with the arrival of a Chinese man, Ah Nuey, who set up market gardens around it.

The Herald wrote on Wed 12 April 1944:

Probably the finest Chinese gardens Victoria has known were those that bordered the Yarra at Heidelberg near the Boulevard. At week-ends many people stopped to admire the painstaking industry of the Chinese and to collect a good bag of vegetables for a shilling. After the 1934 floods, in which some of the gardeners had to be rescued from tree-tops, the land was deserted, and is now used for grazing.

The billabong was used as a water source for the gardens and a stone wall was built across the channel leading to the billabong from the river to aid this. The idea that it was for a water wheel has been put forward however, it may just have been a weir to regulate water after rain or floods.

As The Herald article stated the huge 1934 flood put an end to all the Chinese Market Gardens along the Yarra Flats.

After this the area reverted to grazing land and dairy farms.

Today little evidence remains of any of this intensive horticulture on the river flats. The channel's stone walls still exist as does the remnants of the hedgerow between Charterisville Estate and Hartlands Estate to the north.

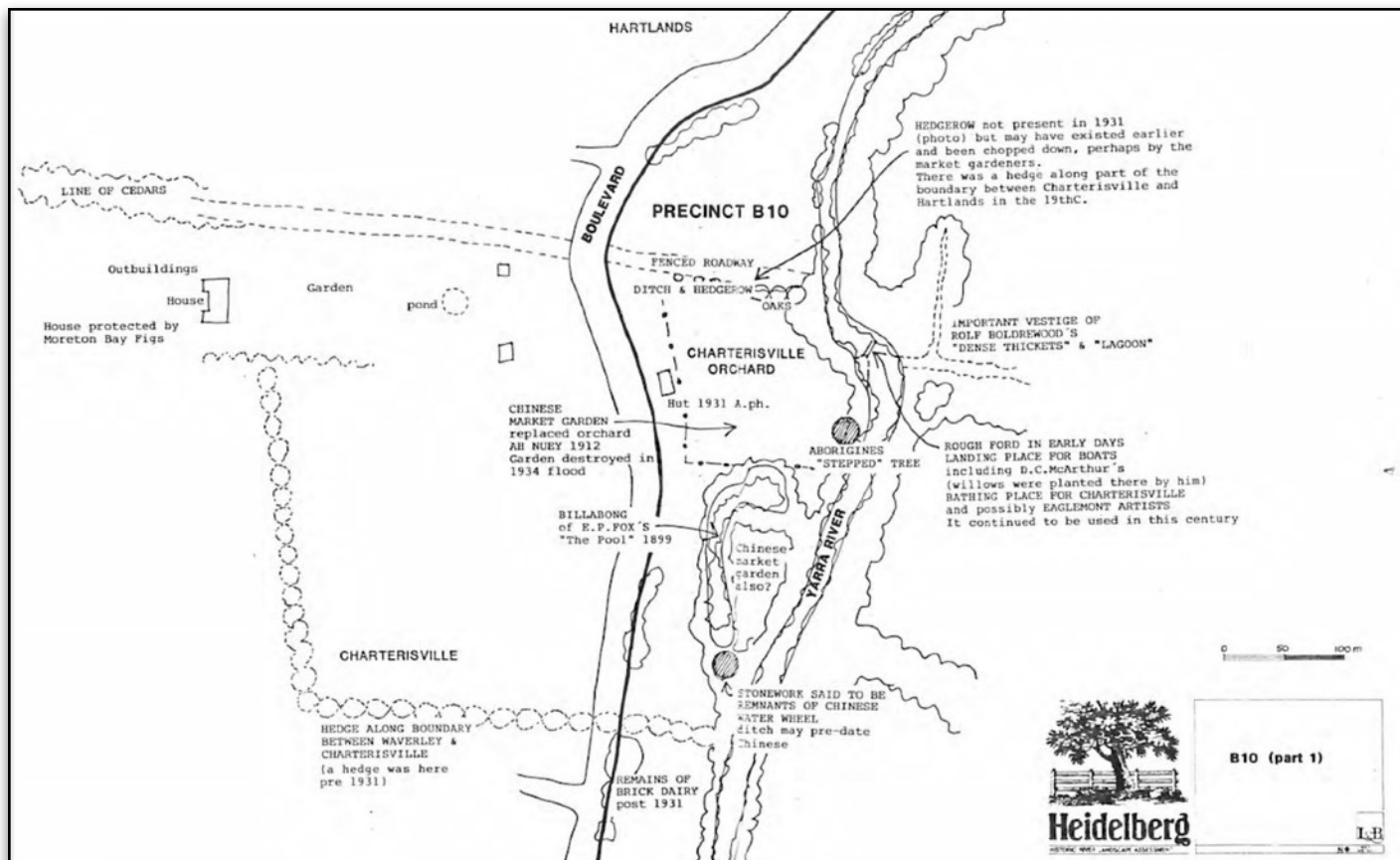


Diagram of the historic features of Charterisville



1945 Aerial photo showing open bare paddocks around the billabong

Back to nature

The dairy farms existed up until the 1970's when the government bought up the land to convert it to public parkland.

In 1984 the Yarra Flats Park was established and the long slow process of restoring it to a more natural state commenced.

Many trees were planted around the billabong in the 1980's to compliment the few that had survived the 150 years of intense agriculture. These were River Red Gums; Manna Gums; Acacias and a few understory plants. These are mainly around the billabong and between the billabong and the Yarra River.

There has been some natural generation, especially of River Red Gums and Tree Violets.

Heavy infestation with woody weeds, pasture grasses, ivy, blackberries and Tradescantia has been allowed to occur.

Somehow remnants of the native wetland ecosystem have hung on and have providing a good nucleus for re-establishing a functioning billabong.

There are few places in Australia that can claim to have a history of such disparate cultures blended with great natural appeal as this small billabong in its riverine setting amid a throng of suburbia. It should occupy the hearts of those who stop to appreciate its Australian character and resilience, and who take time to reflect on the diverse stories of the people who have been drawn to this character before them.

