

## **HISTORIC BOLIN-BOLIN BILLABONG**

Located on Bulleen Road immediately north of the Veneto Club, Bolin-Bolin Billabong has in recent decades been a turgid shadow of the vibrant place I remember as a child in the 1940's and 1950's.

Back then the whole wetlands of the Yarra Valley were refreshed each year by regular flooding, but when the Upper Yarra Dam was built in 1954, this regular often twice a year flooding became a once in a decade event. However, I am pleased to say that in recent years Melbourne Water and Manningham Council have undertaken works to restore the water quality of the Billabong and surrounding area.

This whole river flats area, from where the Heidelberg Bridge now stands, down to the Koonung Creek junction with the Yarra, was a living, meeting and corroboree area. This was particularly so in the eel-harvest season, which ran from mid-February to mid-March each year. During this feasting, the opportunity was always taken to conduct a lot of inter-clan business and settle disputes.

More than a decade ago, some interpretive signage was placed at intervals around the billabong, which will help your orientation and understanding of the importance of the area. However, there is much more information that could and should be included, for instance, an explanation of the true meaning of the billabong's name.

I have seen it put that Bolin-Bolin means 'Lyre Bird', but whilst the Aboriginal name of the bird is 'Bulln-Bulln' and sounds similar, it is demonstrably incorrect. Lyre Birds are ground dwelling, with a habitat of alpine rain-forest. The Yarra valley is not alpine rain-forest and was always seasonally flood prone. Lyre Birds simply could not survive in this environment.

Bolin-Bolin is in fact the same word as Bulleen, which means 'resting place' and the name derives from the story of how two Ancestor Heroes, Barwool and Yan-Yin, who decided to free their lands from flood waters. They then independently began cutting courses for both the Yarra and Plenty Rivers.

When they met, they first had a rest, hence the name Bulleen. They then joined forces, and after wearing out many more stone axes, were able to have the waters empty from their lands and thereby create Port Phillip Bay. In geological terms it is a true story that is about 100,000 years old.

As a child, the story I never tired of hearing was about how my great-grandfather and his brother were taken duck-hunting at Bolin-Bolin in the 1840s, by their tribal friends. This included two men and a gaggle of boys and girls. When they arrived, a flock of ducks was busily paddling about in the middle. One man stood on the bank with three boomerangs, whilst another had a dilly-bag.

The first man began throwing the boomerangs, which circled continuously over the billabong as he caught and threw each one again. The ducks all looked up thinking, 'Is that a hawk or an eagle come to get me?' So, they kept watching skyward intently.

As they did so, the second man with the dilly-bag slipped into the billabong and swam underwater to where the ducks were. He then reached up, grabbed a duck by the feet, dragged it down and stuffed it in the bag. It had disappeared with a neat 'plook' and so did not disturb its friends. They probably just thought he had gone duck-diving.

This trick was repeated half a dozen times and the man then swam back underwater to his friend, who ceased throwing the boomerangs. They all then went home and had Kentucky Fried Duck for lunch.

It was also in this area adjacent to Bolin-Bolin that another of my favourite stories took place. In 1840 the Kerr and Laidlaw families purchased the land there for 15 Pounds, intending to graze sheep. They duly bought their sheep and hired a bagpipe-playing Scotsman as a shepherd. He then immediately established the habit of herding the sheep to a grazing spot, where he would hang his lunch sandwiches in a tree, then sit beneath it and serenade the sheep with his bagpipes.

On one particular day as he skirled his pipes, two Aboriginal men suddenly appeared. He immediately recognised the one who was powerfully built, had rugged features and a scar down his cheek. It was the famed and feared Jagga-Jagga, who regularly terrorised recalcitrant local settlers, by burning their paddocks and driving off their stock. Jagga-Jagga and his companion the young Winberri, sat down either side of the shepherd and Jagga-Jagga motioned to the lunch hanging from the tree branch, saying they were feeling quite peckish.

The shepherd of course immediately got down his lunch and gave it to them. Jagga-Jagga then casually asked him to continue playing while they ate. When Jagga-Jagga and Winberri finished, they thanked the shepherd for the fine repast and musical interlude, then sauntered off. The shepherd immediately herded-up his sheep and returned to his employers with the hair-raising tale of his near-death experience with the legendary Jagga-Jagga.