



MELBOURNE MARITIME HERITAGE NETWORK

Melbourne – A Great Maritime City

MMHN Opportunity 6:

Southbank Maritime Heritage Precinct & Southbank Maritime Heritage Trail

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Urban planning decisions dictating the shaping of the southern river bank, and built form construction in 20th.century have resulted in the complete disregard of the important maritime heritage of this, the southern stretch of the Yarra. MMHN argues that to regard each bank of the river as a separate historic location is an error which arose over time with sporadic, piecemeal, private and public real estate developments on both banks. The River itself was, and still is, a key maritime asset in Melbourne.

The historical maritime heritage narrative of the south bank has been ‘interrupted’ largely without regard for heritage maritime infrastructure assets. MMHN is committed to acknowledging, preserving and celebrating both the evidence which remains and, although it had disappeared, acknowledging and informing the community about that which has been lost.

Regrettably, successive State governments and City of Melbourne councillors have perceived the southern bank of the Yarra as a ‘*brown field*’ site, devoid of history, ripe for redevelopment as part of an urban renewal program for vacant land. This perception was incorrect.

It is important to note the MMHN Vision is to create an opportunity to understand the heritage significance of the river as a single entity by creating a circular trail encompassing the **Northbank Waterways Maritime Trail from ‘Birrarung Marr to the Blue Lake’** (See **MMHN Opportunity 2**) and the **Southbank Maritime Heritage Precinct and Maritime Heritage Trail ‘Billabongs to the Bolte Bridge’** (See details below)

Trade, Transport and Recreation

Upstream from Princes Bridge, the Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG) and the plethora of Rowing Clubs owe their existence to the river. The RBG Lake reminds us of the billabongs of the past. Rowing has always been a popular sport in the past, and continues still.

Around the many iterations of the Princes Bridge, a plethora of jetties from where punts and ferries operated to and from the CBD, transporting people and goods, and provided a launching place for many recreational pastimes from either side of the bridge. For example, upstream from the bridge, rowing sports clubs thrived. In July 1871 the 'Early Closing Association Rowing Club' was established and has been continuously active from premises beside the Yarra River for over 140 years. The name arose from a social movement advocating early closing of shops at 2pm on Saturday to allow workers leisure time. In August 1873 the name 'Yarra Yarra Rowing Club' was chosen specifically as an historical link to Aboriginal variants of the word 'Yarra' to indicate a flowing or rippling character.

Downstream from Princes Bridge, in 1877, Cooper and Bailey's Great American International Circus, one of the first travelling circuses, pitched a Big Top tent on the site. A permanent circus home, Olympia, was built in 1901 by the Fitzgerald Brothers' Circus, then Australia's biggest circus. In 1907, Wirth Brothers' Circus took over the entire site and remained there for the next 50 years until its buildings were destroyed by fire in 1953. During World War I, some of the buildings were used as repatriation homes for soldiers and nurses

In December 1959, Roy Grounds, a noted architect, was appointed to design the National Gallery Centre and Hamer Hall, on or near this south bank river site, which was in use as a car park. The design is considered architecturally arresting and is irrefutably a key cultural asset for Melbourne; but it did not reference the river in any meaningful way. On the contrary, it effectively drew attention away from the river. However, the river could not be ignored. Over eons the shifting meandering river course, the floods and thousands of years of silt deposits made construction technically challenging and costly.

Although several older industrial buildings a set at a distance from the riverside were identified for retention, wharf side infrastructure was deemed to be without value. In the 1990s Southbank Promenade, Southgate Restaurant and Shopping Precinct, and Crown Casino, were constructed but certainly not in a manner acknowledging the maritime heritage of the river, nor its heritage value as a public asset. Looking to the river, the visual impression is that of an encased stone channel and not the site of what was once a thriving river trade port.

Downstream from Princes Bridge, burgeoning maritime trade led to the construction of extensive infrastructure along the southern banks of the Yarra – wharves, jetties and warehouses, infrastructure that was integral to maritime trade which generated Melbourne's prosperity prior to the construction of Victoria Harbour. Inland, and set back from the waterfront, in South Melbourne, Port Melbourne and Fishermen's Bend, distribution and processing facilities allied to the maritime trade were constructed and this led to a growth of associated industries.

Further downstream, in 2004 a new Convention and Exhibition Centre was commenced – a collaboration project between the state government and the City of Melbourne. The Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC) opened in 2009 and was expanded later by a further 25%. Nevertheless, a large grassed open space remains between the river and the MCEC forming an extensive and successful public asset overlooking a visually striking bend on the river immediately opposite the CBD.

However, access to the river itself from the south bank has been made difficult. The treatment of the riverbank route is inconsistently developed, with no informative signage. The natural riparian zone has been eliminated. MMHN argues that the value of this CBD open space is far from optimised, and this can be ameliorated in the short and longer term. With minimal investment, this lacklustre space can be re-configured to great advantage.

Southbank Maritime Precinct - Optimizing the Asset

MMHN recognizes that Maritime Heritage of Southbank – establishing a delineated Southbank Maritime Precinct in association with a signed Maritime Heritage Trail has important tourism potential. It is undoubtedly an ‘Opportunity’ for Melbourne.

With minimal investment and collaboration between responsible authorities (National Trust, MCEC, Plenary, State Govt. Yarra Traders and City of Melbourne) in the short-term, maintenance and informative signage would make a remarkable difference to this shabby area.

MMHN Proposes several easily achieved steps to significantly improve the precinct in the short term:

- Increase the ‘visibility’ of the Pump House so that its connection with the Dry Dock and the *Polly Woodside* is made clear
- Identify, refresh and illuminate the shabby collection of maritime assets (unidentified anchors, buoys, signals mast, etc). scattered in an ad hoc manner at this location
- Re-locate two large buoys within the National Trust fenced surrounding Polly Woodside yard to sit more impressively alongside with the other buoys
- Re-fresh and respect the Merchant Seamen’s Flag Pole and memorial
- Celebrate and inform the public on the heritage significance of the only surviving heritage-listed Dry Dock, Wet Dock in Victoria.

Vision and investment

What is needed in the longer term, requiring vision and serious tourism infrastructure investment:

MMHN proposes there are two options

- Drain the Dry Dock – use the example of the immensely successful maritime museum ships *Cutty Sark* (Greenwich) and the *Gt. Britain* (Bristol) here the dry dock . In these maritime museums, the vessels sit under a watertight glass roof creating space for exhibitions or events . Taking heritage vessel out of the water has the additional benefit of reducing maintenance costs and damage. See [ssgreatbritain](#). And [cutty-sark](#) Note both of these Museum/Ships are major tourist attractions in the UK.
- Relocate the vessel *Polly Woodside* onto to a barge berthed alongside the river to be accessed from the open space. Currently the vessel is located in the middle of an adult hospitality precinct and its former museum premises are leased to a hospitality group.

Southbank Maritime Heritage Trail Narrative Project

In June 2023 the project entitled “*Billabongs to the Bolte Bridge*” commenced to research and record the maritime heritage along south bank of the river from the vicinity of the Royal Botanic Gardens through Southbank to the Bolte West Precinct and Fishermen’s Bend and Bolte Bridge identifying existing and lost maritime heritage assets. It will be completed early in 2024.

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