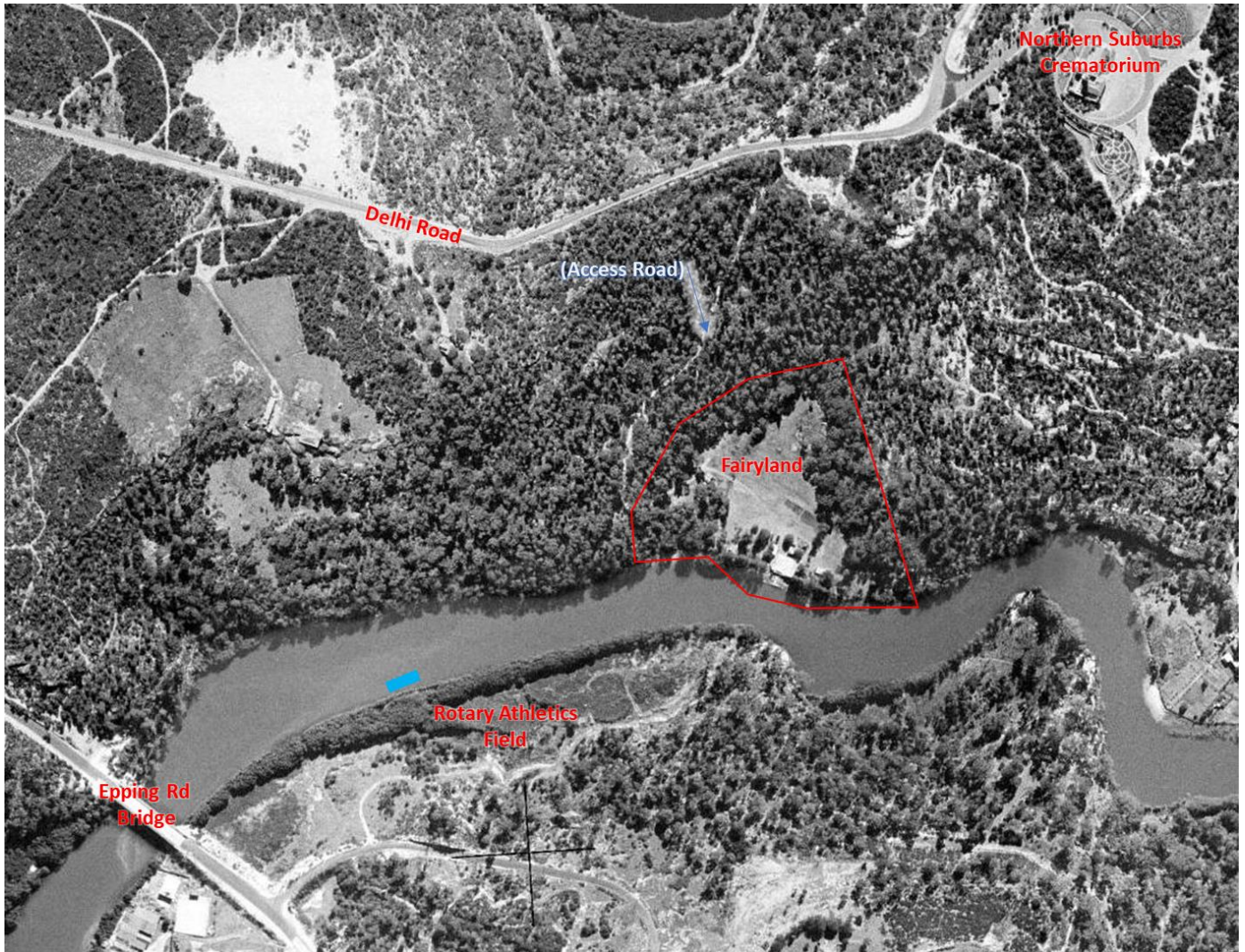


Local History Research: Fairyland Pleasure Grounds

Observant paddlers may have caught glimpses of a bit of 'local history' on the opposite river bank ~100m upstream of the pontoon. The giveaway is a large mature date palm set back about 5m from the river bank. The area is now thoroughly over-run with weeds, pampas grass so not much to look at, but it does tell some stories.

The aerial photograph (source: marked up version of Six Maps image [copyright]) below shows the area as it was in 1943 – the extent of the cleared area of Fairyland quite visible.

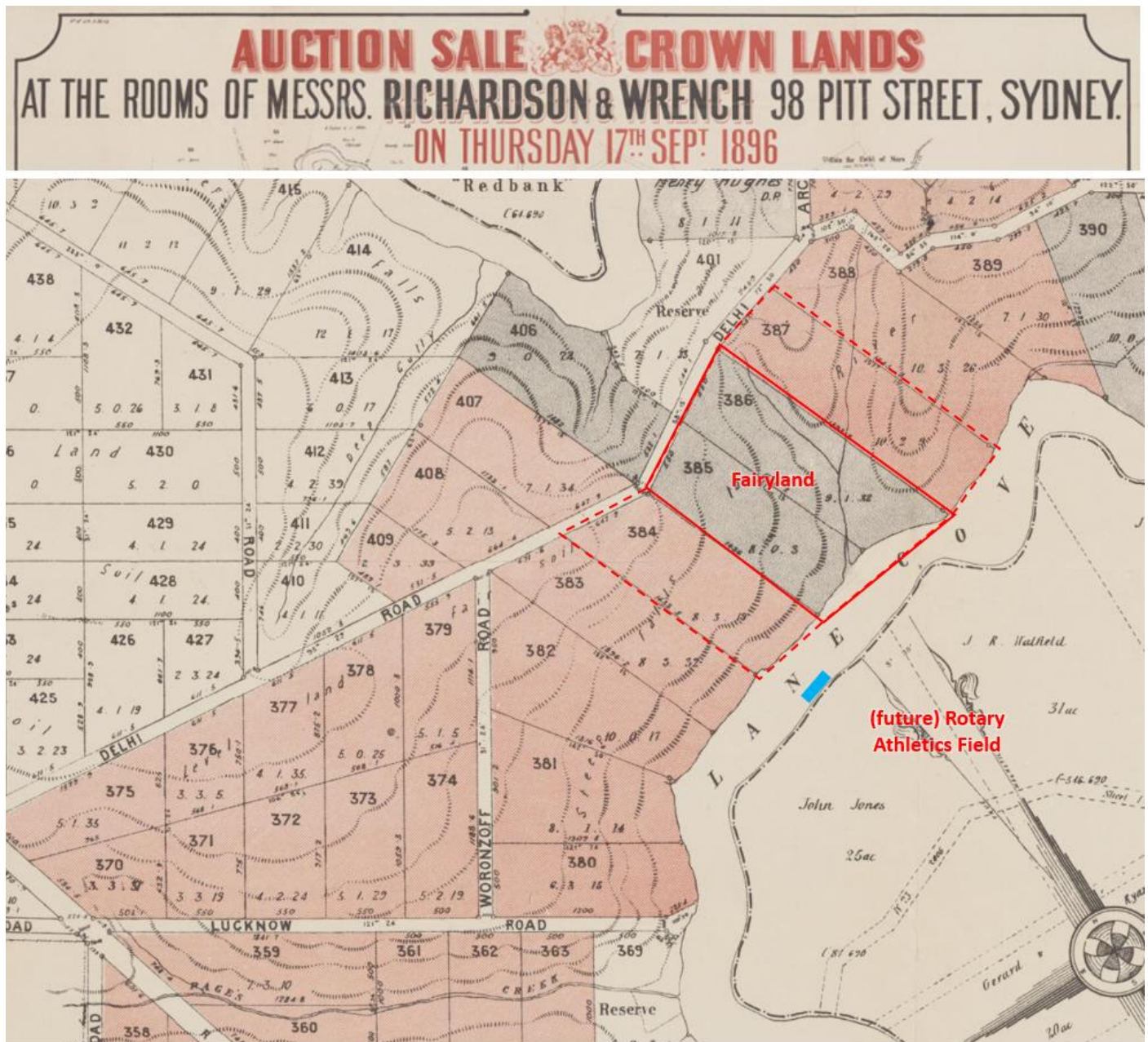


Indigenous History

The local indigenous Australian people, the Cammeraygal occupied the area south/east of the river for at least 5,800 years. The Wallumettagal people were located north/west of the river. The original area was relatively flat and swampy. Vegetated mostly by eucalyptus, acacia, ti tree, bracken, swamp oak and paperbark. Source: Wiki

1896

In 1896, 17 acres of land with substantial frontage to the Lane Cove Rive was purchased for 141 pounds by Robert J.C. Swan and other members of the Swan family... Known officially as Portions 385 and 386, this land later became the Fairyland Pleasure Grounds. The adjoining portions, 384 and 387 were also purchased by members of the Swan family a few months later. Source: A History of North Ryde 1850-1950 - George Redding..



Source: Trove - <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-230182922>

Early 1900-1920

After purchasing the land, the Swans stayed there at weekends, travelling initially by boat but soon by horse and sulky. The flat area was cleared and a market garden was established using Chinese labour. Strawberries and watermelons were grown commercially and a few fruit trees were planted for family use. New Zealand flax, still flourishing today, was planted to provide ties for the strawberry punnets.

Picnickers and tourist boats began to call in to buy strawberries and this soon developed into afternoon teas with strawberries and cream. A jetty was built about 1900. Recognising the site's recreational attraction, the Swan family decided to develop it as a pleasure resort... Initially the resort was known simply as Swan's Picnic Grounds, but the more imaginative name of Fairyland Tea Gardens evolved about 1914...

Source: A History of North Ryde 1850-1950 - George Redding..

Robert Swan and other member of the Swan family bought portions with substantial frontage to the Lane Cove River in 1896. 'Fairyland' comprised around 17 acres of flat land covered in ti-trees, paperbarks, swamp oaks and bracken ferns, with a small creek running across the site from the steeper land beyond.

Robert Swan had part of the land cleared and developed as a market garden, growing strawberries and watermelons. New Zealand flax was planted to provide ties for the strawberry punnets.

Picnickers and tourist boats began to stop to buy strawberries and were soon being offered afternoon teas with strawberries and cream. By 1905 the area had acquired a name "The Rest" and between 1905 and 1910 the market gardens were phased out and the area became dedicated to recreation.

Source: Lighter side of Willoughby



Above: Postcard of Fairyland c1908 – looking upstream to the opposite bank Source:.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/state-records-nsw/7072299429>

After noticing the success of the Avenue Pleasure Grounds downstream at the Fig Tree Bridge and the Fern Bay Pleasure Grounds at Drummoyne, the Swan family then changed the area for recreation.

They planted exotic plant species such as the camphor laurel and date palm. Placing painted fairytale figures on trees, and carved fairy like wooden figures were placed in the grounds, such as Little Bo Peep. There was a slippery-dip in the shape of a sleeping giant, supposedly based on the character "Brutus" from Popeye. Other features were the wooden pirate boat, tiny tots and the upside-down house. Fairyland soon became popular and successful.

Fairyland offered a more enticing prospect than its two rivals, mainly due to a more remote and appealing location. Access to the ground was mostly by ferry. A wharf was built on the river. Some boats would take up to 70 passengers at a time. Two of the craft regularly visiting Fairylands were the Escort and the Twilight. In 1918, when the Upper Lane Cove River Ferry Company closed, Fairyland acquired some of their ferries to be part of Fairyland's operations. Church groups, schools, companies and families used the area for picnics and recreation

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairyland,_Lane_Cove_River

1920 - 1940

Fairyland offered such activities as cricket, dancing, boat swings, razzle dazzles, picnic sheds, tug of war, and even egg and spoon races. In those heavily chaperoned days it also provided the opportunity for some young people to judiciously 'get lost' even if only for a little while, until noticed to be missing.

The small capacity of the upriver launches meant that Fairyland needs bigger boats than could be used above Fullers Bridge [the weir was not built until the 1930's]. Rosmans ferry launches served the area, as did a brace of well-deckers owned by the Swan family, plus chartered small ferries as required.

(Source: Graeme Andrews - Afloat Magazine May 2014 No. 295)

A dance hall was built around 1930. Also around that time, netting was installed around a small sandy beach on the river for swimming. Certain dancers were known to take a train to Chatswood, then walk downhill to the eastern side of the river, then call for boats to take them across the river to the dance hall. After the construction of Fullers Bridge, a road was built down from Delhi road. Parking was available for 120 cars. In wet weather, the parking area became soaked, with cars being bogged

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairyland,_Lane_Cove_River



Above: Picnic boats drawn up at "Fairyland" wharf, around 1930 Source: library.ryde.nsw.gov.au via Pinterest

Travel by boat was not without it's challenges – we can't be sure if MudRunners flat was the location of the following incident:

STRANDED ALL NIGHT ON MUDBANK

Distressing Experiences Of Picnic Party

ABOUT 50 girls and young men had a terrifying experience last night and early to-day when their launch stuck fast on a mudbank almost in the middle of the Lane Cove River, near **Fairyland**.

The craft remained hard and fast for nine hours. Some of the party waded ashore through a mangrove swamp, sinking to the waist in mud.

Hordes of mosquitoes added to their misery. To-day many of the picnickers are showing large lumps on their bodies.

The party had poined a picnic at Fairyland Pleasure Grounds, and about 6.30 p.m. they boarded the last boat returning to the city.

A strong wind was blowing and light rain falling. The skipper was trying to follow a difficult channel through the mudbanks, when the launch struck.

Engines Raced Astern

The engines were raced in reverse, the anchor was thrown out, and strong arms tried to haul the craft off the mud.

The whole party was told to dash from side to side in an effort to create a wash strong enough to drift the launch off.

After nearly an hour of this, rafts were put over the side and three men in shorts and singlets boarded them and tried to push the launch off, but failed.

To calm the nerves of some of the passengers, an impromptu concert was staged. One girl became ill from shock, and had to receive treatment.

Before 10 p.m. the launch was so far out of water, because of the falling tide that it tilted alarmingly, causing a minor panic.

Barefoot Walk

About 10.30 five boys and three girls agreed to face the mud. They reached the shore after several unnerving adventures, and then walked with their bare feet cut a mile to a house.

Shortly before midnight, another party, consisting of about 15 couples, also waded ashore. Some of the

girls were showing signs of hysteria and had to be carried. All had to walk nearly three miles without shoes to Gladesville, where they caught a tram.

The others—including the sick girl—remained on board until the launch was refloated at 4 a.m. It was then driven to the city, where the passengers disembarked.



Above: Predecessor to the Time Trial? A rowing race amongst picnic goers coming upriver opposite Fairyland (LCRK pontoon would be approx. mid-photo on opposite bank). Source: library.ryde.nsw.gov.au via Pinterest

1940 - 1970

When I went there, about 1948 as a junior member of a scout troop, there was a seemingly incredibly long flying fox from which I managed to fall a couple of metres onto fairly soft earth.
(Source: Graeme Andrews - Afloat Magazine May 2014 No. 295)

After WWII patronage at Fairyland went into a slow decline. Cars became much more popular but motor traffic could not be accommodated so easily. Boats could moor or drop anchor in the river with little difficulty by the number of cars that could be parked was limited, especially when the grounds were soft after rain.

Another problem was that the flat area on which the pleasure grounds were located was prone to floods which had drastic effects. When a flood was expected, seats and tables had to be tied to trees and shelter sheds. After a flood the area was sometimes covered with a coating of soft mud and silt to such an extent that the grounds would have to be closed to the public for an extended period.

Source: A History of North Ryde 1850-1950. George Redding

● **Ghost party** . . . guests will dress as famous ghosts at a Ghost Party-cum-barbecue to be held on the night of the full moon, November 29 at **Fairylands, Lane Cove** . . . phosphorescent figures floating on **Lane Cove** River and elaborate sound effects will add to the eerie atmosphere . . . the party is being organised by the Younger Set of the English Speaking Union.

Source: The Daily Telegraph – Thu 23 Oct 1952 via Trove

In the 1960's, Fairyland was the venue for at least one "Rock Concert).

...In September, 1963 [the Bee Gees] appeared at their first Sydney 2UW Spectacular, a four-hour concert at Lane Cove National Park [Fairyland Pleasure Grounds] sponsored by a local radio station. Over 40,000 were in attendance to watch not only the Bee Gees but Warren Williams, Lonnie Lee, Col Joye and the Joy Boys, Johnny Rebb, Laurel Lea and the DeKroo Brothers, Judy Stone and Noeleen Batley... Source: The Ultimate Biography Of The Bee Gees: Tales Of The Brothers Gibb

By Melinda Bilyeu, Hector Cook, Andrew Môn Hughes



Above: A couple of snaps from the 1963 2UW Rock N Roll Spectacular. Source: Pinterest - Ebay listing

1970's

In the mid 20th century, Fairyland lost much of its popular appeal. Particularly with the expanding suburbs of Sydney, the diminishing remoteness, the rise of the motor car and the opening of the Epping Road bridge. After a series of floods in 1967, 1968 and 1969 Fairyland closed. The area was purchased by the National Parks of New South Wales in the late 1970s. Little evidence of the park exists today, particularly after the severe fires of 1994. The access road off Delhi Road is currently closed, overgrown and barely recognizable. A pair of rusted gate holders and some asphalt are all that remain.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairyland,_Lane_Cove_River

Pictured below are the remains of the Fairyland Wharf in 1970 (Source: Graeme Andrews - Afloat Magazine May 2014 No. 295)



Now

Much of the site has been disastrously altered or destroyed. Both the physical environment and the heritage items which remain continue to deteriorate. In particular:

- *Much of the flat has been permanently flooded by the damming of the creek by silt and debris.*
- *The large camphor-laurel planted by the Swans has seeded through the site and young camphors are growing unchecked. Likewise broad-leaf privet is proliferating.*
- *The pleasure ground equipment we necessarily dismantled when the site closed but the remaining buildings (dance hall, picnic shelter) were destroyed by Trust directive in the 1980s*
- *The last Swan house in the bushland above the flat was destroyed in the 1970s due to termite infestation.*
- *The Fairyland sign at the Delhi road entrance to the access road has been substantially buried under fill.*
- *The former access road is severely eroded and gullied in steeper sections where it acts as a channel for run-off.*
- *Mangroves are rapidly taking over the shoreline.*

Source: The Upper Lane Cove: History, Heritage, Bibliography – Lynne McLoughlin and Margaret Wyatt 1993

You can still check out the area – although it's thoroughly overgrown beyond the marked walking track and boardwalk. The simplest method is to paddle over and clamber up the bank. There's informational signage and some remnants of what used to be there (including brick structures and the remains of an old car). If you want a bit of a hike – there's a track (part of the Great North Walk) accessible from the North Ryde side of Epping Bridge – or from the end of Quebec Rd West Chatswood. Details here <https://www.bitesizetraveller.com/sydney-walks/lane-cove-national-park-fairyland-loop-track/>