

## South Brisbane Riverside Historical Walk

This walk follows the bank of the Brisbane River from South Brisbane to the locality of Hill End, in the suburb of West End. Whilst there are some surviving heritage sites along the way, much will rely on the walker's imagination. For this reason, I've included quite a few images covering a period of almost 200 years, which represents only a minuscule time in comparison to the period of habitation of the area.

The area we are circling is known as Kurilpa by its traditional owners, meaning the place of the Kuril, a small rodent with the scientific name of *Melomys cervinipes*.

We start near the Vulture Street entrance to South Bank but the walk can of course be done in reverse, which may be more convenient for those arriving by car as parking is much easier at West End. The starting point is very close to the Southbank busway station, railway station and ferry terminal.

The walk which covers around 6.6km could be expected to take around 1 ½ hours to 2 hours and is almost entirely in parkland. There are many spots to sit along the way as well as water fountains.

### 1. Vulture Street

Our walk commences at what was the closest thing to the centre of the City of South Brisbane. This local government entity existed from 1888 until 1925, when it was absorbed into the expanded City of Brisbane.

Busy Vulture Street started life in 1843 as an east-west line through the bush on a map, marking the southern boundary of Brisbane Town. From the 1850s, Aboriginal people were illegally compelled to remain beyond the boundary during the hours of darkness and on Sundays. The street was named in the mid-1850s after a Royal Navy frigate serving in the Crimean War.

The ridge which extended from here to the location of Brisbane State High School was a habitual camping ground for tens of thousands of years. The landscape has been dramatically modified, principally by the large cutting made in 1889 to remove the previous steep climb. The palatial 1890 Stephens family home "Cumbooquepa", a part of Somerville House School since 1919, is at the original level of Vulture Street.

Part of the ridge was also removed in 1891 to allow the building of the Municipal Chambers, usually referred to as the South Brisbane Town Hall. The clock tower remained empty until 1904, when Australia's first electrically driven clock was installed by the Synchronome Company.

After the demise of the South Brisbane City Council, the building had many uses including offices for the US Army during World War 2, and the home of the Queensland Conservatory of Music. Since 1999, it has been part of Somerville House School.

In 1922, the Council purchased land for a park to serve as a memorial to the fallen of World War One. It was



*Figure 1 The municipal Chambers before the clock was fitted.*

originally part of the sloping ridge which was cut away in stages up to 1952. Much of the park has been resumed over the years for roadworks.

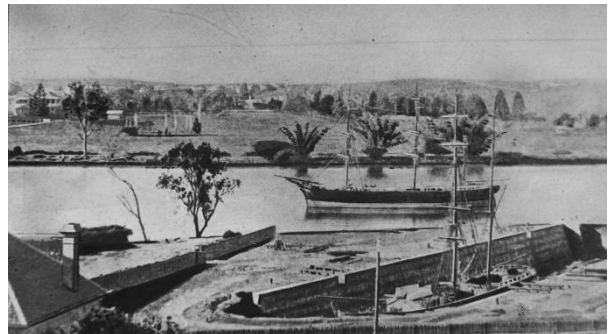


*The park area being flattened in 1952. (BCC)*

A plaque marks where the South Brisbane Fire Station stood at the corner of Vulture and Grey Streets from 1892 until 1920.

## **2. The South Brisbane Post and Telegraph Office**

The original part of the building on our left was the Post and Telegraph Office, designed by early Brisbane architect FDG Stanley, and built in 1881 on what was Stanley Street. It was subsequently extended twice in around 1889 and 1902. It became the South Brisbane Mechanics Institute and Library, and later the South Brisbane Technical College after the State Government took over technical education. The building is now home to the Griffith Film School.

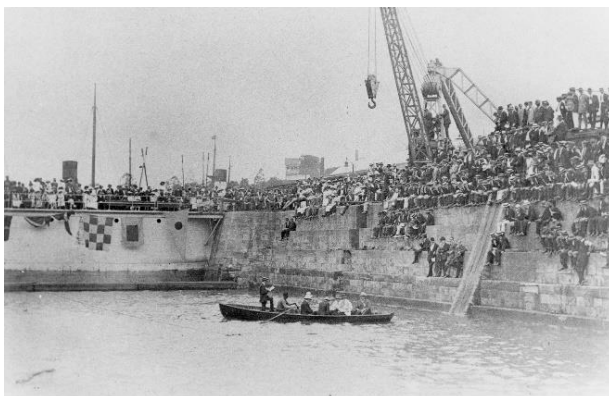


*The dry dock and the "Doon" in 1881. (SLQ)*

## **3. Dry dock or Graving Dock**

We cross the street here to get a view of the dry dock.

A stream once babbled down from the location of *Cumbooquepa* to where we are standing. A resident in the 1850s described the scene. *"The site of the Dry Dock was occupied by a small but dense jungle scrub whose giant vines stretched octopus-like arms around yellowwood, pine, and fig".*



*A swimming carnival in the dry dock in 1913.*

Construction of the South Brisbane dry dock began in 1876 and it was ready for use in December of 1880. Soon after, a [note](#) that *"scarcely a night passes without half a dozen or more daring young urchins being seen splashing about in the water."* It wasn't until 9 months later that the first ship used the dock. This was the barque "Doon" that had been damaged in a storm.

With a severe lack of large swimming pools in Brisbane and a growing interest in the sport, the

first swimming carnival was held in the dry dock in 1902. It was regularly used until around 1925, when the Australian Championships were held here, with as many as 3,000 spectators attending.

The dry dock closed in 1972 and has formed part of the Queensland Maritime Museum since 1979. It is home to HMAS Diamantina, a river class frigate and the largest surviving World War 2 RAN vessel. Beyond the dry dock were the South Brisbane coal wharves, in operation from 1882. The railway closed in 1961. Remnants of the wharves can be seen from the bottom of the cliffs.

#### 4. The Ship Inn

We cross back across the street to follow the harbour. The Ship Inn was built by Irishman Daniel Donovan in 1865 when it was known as the Railway Hotel, named in anticipation of the railway which was still decades in the future. It was a financial failure but opened again in 1879 as the Ship Inn. It traded until 1979 by which time the once busy wharf area had fallen into decline. The hotel had fallen on hard times and was closed down by the licensing authorities. Expo 88 bought it back to life albeit with heavy renovation work that led to the loss of its heritage listing.



Stanley Street with the Ship Inn and flour mill. (Percy Meara)



An 1876 painting of the sawmill by Charles Gordon Sebastian Hurst (SLQ)

At the location of the apartment building to the right as we pass down the harbour was McGhie and Luya's sawmills and joinery works and their Noosa Wharf where timber arrived from the firm's mill at Lake Cootharaba. Later it was the site of the Sea Foam Flour Mill.

#### 5. Stanley Street

Stanley Street followed the route of the ancient Aboriginal pathway that led out along what is now Annerley Road to the west. In the early 1840s, squatter's men followed this route with their loads of wool. On this and adjacent streets, the small community of South Brisbane grew.

Only a few short sections of the street remain today, including this one with two heritage buildings. On the left is drapery firm Allan and Stark's store built in 1885. It was designed by the noted Brisbane architect A. B. Wilson. They moved to higher ground in Queen Street after the devastating 1893 flood. The firm grew to become a major department store owner before



*The Imperial Baths with Allan and Stark's building behind are on the left. A ferry punt is crossing the river. (SLQ)*



being taken over by Myers. The South Brisbane Gas and Light Company occupied the building for many years.

The Plough Inn on the left at the other end of the section of the street, also designed by A. B. Wilson and built in 1885, replaced an earlier hotel with the same name. In the 1940s, there were 7 pubs operating nearby.

The Imperial Baths were constructed in 1899 directly across the street from Allan and Stark's and were at the time the largest in Brisbane, in frequent use for carnivals. Seven years later, the railway was extended along Stanley Street from the coal wharves to Victoria Bridge, resulting in the demolition of the baths. Today their coincides with the Southbank beach and lagoon.

This was also the location of the Ernest Street or "new" ferry, a punt that could carry carts and animals such as flocks of sheep. We follow the path to the riverbank.

## 6. The river front

South Brisbane quickly gained a reputation as a rough and ready location. Here's a description written by one visitor in the 1840s.

*"Passing up the road leading from the water side, in the direction of the accommodation house, we were at once in the midst, pell mell, of bullock bows and yokes wielded and hurled in fearful proximity to our persons. Yells of fiendish blasphemy were uttered on every side, whilst a woman, with her front teeth knocked out from the blow of a yoke, stood shrieking for help in the midst of this rum maddened throng."*



South Brisbane in 1845 showing the tree used to tie up ships and ferries crossing the river. (George Fairholme, Michell Library)

A creek meandered from a swamp that extended down Merivale Street and Melbourne Street to flow into the river close to this point. Drainage work over many decades was undertaken as there was regular flooding and the wetlands had been badly polluted.

When Europeans first arrived in the 1820s, the river had a far different appearance. Soldiers would walk out onto sand banks to fish. The river only became tidal here after extensive dredging which in turn led to the development of South Brisbane as a port.

As the town grew, shipbuilders, sawmills and wharves jostled for space along the riverfront. At this location on a July evening in 1866, Emily Monk christened what was at that time the largest ship built in Brisbane, the 21 metre "Lilly". It was designed by her shipbuilder husband Elijah as a lightship to be stationed in Keppel Bay. Shortly after the couple had financial difficulties and hurriedly left Brisbane, never to be heard from again.

Stanley Street passed from residential to commercial and then industrial before its decline and eventual redevelopment as the Expo 88 site. Walking along the riverfront today, it's hard to imagine the busy port and the sounds of sailors in the streets and pubs speaking languages from all over the world.



## 7. Victoria Bridge Area

Soon after the Brisbane Council was established in 1859, planning for a bridge across the river commenced. Construction didn't begin until 1864 due to interference by Ipswich politicians who feared it would block river navigation.

Wooden scaffolding required for construction was used as a temporary bridge which later collapsed. A banking crisis in 1866 brought construction to a halt for some years, and the bridge wasn't completed until 1874.

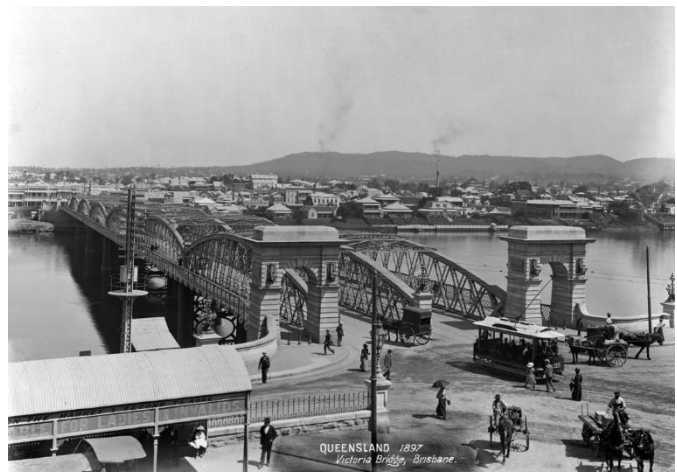


*The first Victoria bridge and the floating baths ca. 1880 (Fryer Library).*

The first Victoria Baths were moored here from 1877 until 1885, moved upstream, and soon after destroyed by a flood. The land next to the bridge was later the location of a fish market.

The first bridge itself was destroyed by the massive 1893 flood and temporarily repaired while the second bridge was constructed. Large sections of the first bridge's ironwork still lie in the mud on the river bottom.

The first stage of the second bridge was completed in 1896. A section of the abutment is all that remains today, as it was demolished in 1969 when the current bridge opened.



From here we pass under the bridge, take either the boardwalk or the more shaded concrete path on the left, and rejoin the boardwalk before the Museum of Modern Art.

**8. Kurilpa Point** Here was a crossing point, where communal canoes were left on each side of the river. Large groups of people also often swam across as a group, using spears and yam sticks to assist flotation.

Two floating baths were successively moored at the point between 1885 and 1893. Both were destroyed by floods.



*The second Victoria Baths at left ca. 1891(Henry King SMAS), and the location today (P. Granville).*

### 9. South Brisbane Baths

Between 1902 and 1927, the South Brisbane Baths were also located at the point. The pool was refreshed every day with water pumped up from the river. They were in frequent use by school groups for swimming lessons and for carnivals until the pool was eclipsed by newer ones.



*The South Brisbane Baths ca. 1910 (SLQ) and the location today. (P. Granville)*

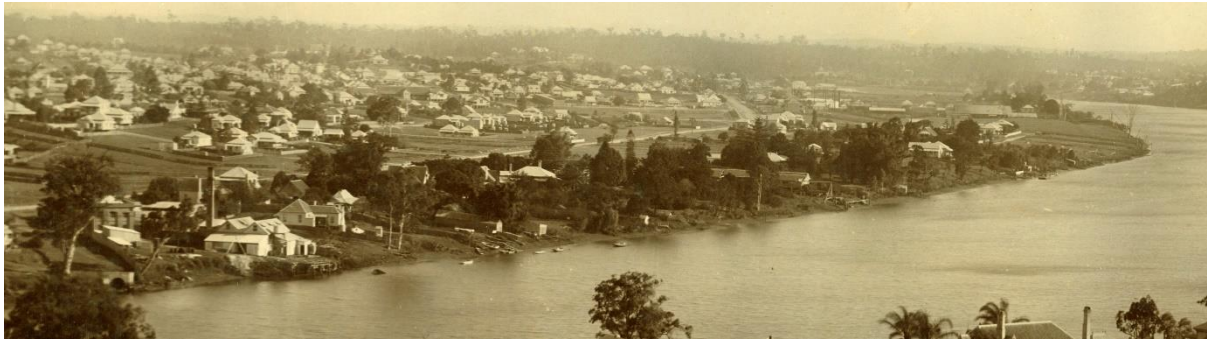
### 10. Milton Reach

Walking around the point we arrive at Milton reach. The river bank here was described on the arrival of Europeans as a *"tangled mass of trees, vines, flowering creepers, staghorns, elkhorns, towering scrub palms, giant ferns and hundreds of other members of the fern family, beautiful and rare orchids and the wild passion flower"*.

The land along the river was very fertile and in the convict era some 350 acres (140 hectares) were under cultivation with wheat and corn. Aboriginal people collected grain being grown on their land and conflicts ensued, as the Europeans were largely dependent on what they could grow.

After the beginning of free European settlement in 1842, small farm blocks along the river were surveyed and sold. The area was for decades a source of fruit, vegetables, wheat, and corn before slowly transforming into an industrial zone.





*In this 1890s image, there is some industry on the riverbank at the left of the image where we are standing, with much of the remainder still orchards and market gardens. (SLQ)*

The art deco style Grey Street or William Jolly Bridge was completed in 1932. It was the second city bridge and built by the City Council when the State Government declined to contribute to the Council's first preference at Kangaroo Point, now the Story Bridge. A row boat ferry operated here before the bridge was built.

Just before the railway bridge, which in 1978 finally connected railways on either side of the river, is the end of Boundary Street, surveyed in 1843 as the western border of Brisbane Town.

#### **11. Foggitt and Jones warehouse**

Foggitt, Jones and Co. were manufacturers of ham, bacon and smallgoods, They built this three-story brick warehouse in around 1917 as the area rapidly transformed from agricultural to industrial usage. The company name is still visible from the river path although now obscured by a tree.

#### **12. Hockings "Rosaville Nursery"**

Albert Hockings arrived in Brisbane as a young man in 1848 and ran a South Brisbane store and saw pit with his brother. Albert had a passion for horticulture and established a nursery at this location in about 1851. He and his wife Elizabeth Bailey built their home "*The Oaks*" here on some 7 acres of riverside land, later expanded to 10 acres ( 4 hectares).



*"The Oaks" in 1931, when it was the residence of the manager of Humes Pipes.*

Hockings experimented with many varieties of fruit trees that he imported and developed hybrids suitable for the Queensland climate. The nursery was badly damaged by the 1893 flood but Hocking's son had relocated the business shortly before. By the 1920s, the nursery had given way to a chemical plant and a pipe factory and nearby residents were complaining about the smell of the phenol being produced there.

A rowboat ferry service operated from here to Milton until 1939. Across the river, one of the few Brisbane 19<sup>th</sup> century rows of terrace houses, Cook Terrace, was built in 1888/89 by Joseph Bain Cook. The homes were for rental as Queensland law didn't allow for the granting of titles to individual terrace houses.

### 13. Drainage

Along the riverbank we will pass at least 16 large drain outlets, not always easily visible from the pathway, especially if it's high tide. Draining the swampy Kurilpa peninsula to avoid flooding and health issues took many decades. A small creek flowed into the river here and still flows through the drainage system below our feet.

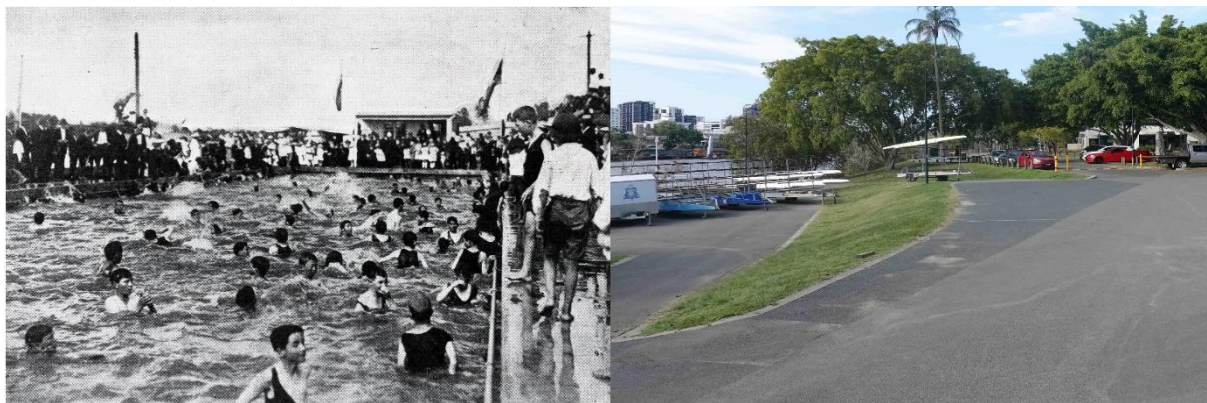
### 14. Davies Park Swimming Pool

We continue along the riverside roadway that was built after the clearing of aging industrial buildings in the 1950s, before arriving at Davies Park.

In 1921 the South Brisbane Council bought a parcel of land adjoining Davies Park for the purpose of a new swimming pool. It was the first in Brisbane to allow mixed bathing, but only on Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings. It closed in 1967.



*The riverside near Davies Park before clearing in the 1950s. (BCC)*



*Davies Park Baths in 1921 (BCC) and the location today, (P. Granville)*

The cairn mounted plaque commemorating Alfred Baynes was originally located at North Quay near the previous Commercial Rowing Club shed. Baynes, a member of Commercial, was undefeated Queensland Sculls champion over 6 years and Australian champion in 1920 and 1928. Baynes died from blood poisoning at just 33 years of age, leaving a widow and baby daughter.

### 15. Davies Park

West End pharmacist and alderman John Davies had a passion for sport and was the driving force behind the purchase of the parkland in 1900. It has been a centre for Rugby League since 1901 but



has also been used for cricket, soccer, women's baseball, the South Brisbane Exhibition, boxing and music festivals as well as many other activities.

For 5 years from 1927 it was home to a popular motorcycle speedway described by one nearby resident as *"an inferno of diabolical sounds, interspersed with the shrieks and yells of admirers of the contestants, which completely beggar description."*

During the Depression, the park was home to a large community of homeless men, and in the evening local residents lined the riverbank fishing for dinner.

If you are walking on a Saturday morning, you'll encounter a lively market here.



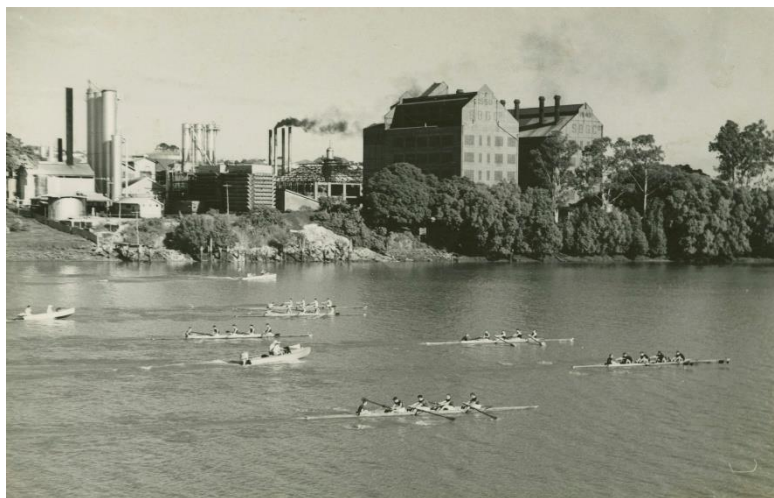
*Patriotic Carnival at Davies Park in 1914.*

## 16. The West End Gas Works

The West End Gas Works was established in 1885 and continued in operation, at least as a storage facility, until the 1990s. It supplied gas for street lighting as well as industrial and domestic use, along with coke commonly used for home heating and in stoves.

The cast iron gas stripping tower was relocated in the park in 1979. It was manufactured in Yorkshire and transported in parts to Brisbane in 1912 as part of an upgrade to the works.

A long waterhole known as Kurilpa Swamp stretched parallel to the river from here for around 800 metres, and fed the creek mentioned in item 13 above. The water was used by market gardeners, but became badly polluted. In 1916, it was described as a *"stinkpot and disease ridden inferno"* and the writer went on to say that *"the water therein is covered with unhealthy looking*



*The West End Gas Works in the 1950s (SLQ).*

*green slime, which, to an amateur on sanitary science, looks bad and polluted*". In 1917 it was implicated in typhoid outbreaks and drained.

### 17. Ferry Street

A ferry service from here to Toowong was in operation from about 1876. It was handy for Hill End residents wishing to catch a train or go to the Regatta Hotel. The closest pub otherwise was on Boundary Street. The service closed in 1974, after almost 100 years. Patronage was dropping and there was flood damage to the pontoon at Toowong.

On the high ground at the end of Ferry Street stood the home "*Harriesville*" built in around 1872 by Eustace Harries, a draftsman, and his wife Frances. Eustace died in 1872 and Frances survived him by 60 years.

The house was moved to North Tamborine in 1979, leaving the Bunya Pines as a memory.

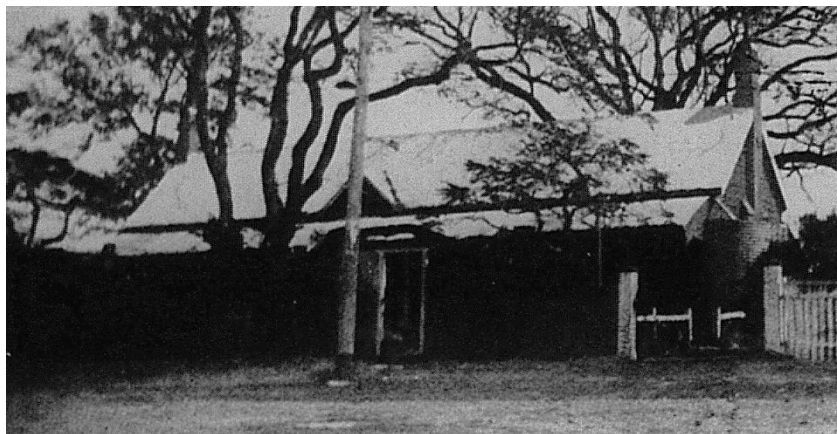


*Harriesville (Allan Webb)*

### 18. Cranbrook

On another rise overlooking the river "*Cranbrook*" was built in 1885 by Walter and Emily Morcom who owned a printing business in George Street. After passing through a few hands, it was purchased by the Queensland Government in 1900 and was used as an Aboriginal girls' home until 1906. These girls were "placed in service" as part of the then government's policy of protection.

This area was recognised as a Sorry Site by former Lord Mayor Jim Soorley and a plaque, seat and flagpoles were erected.



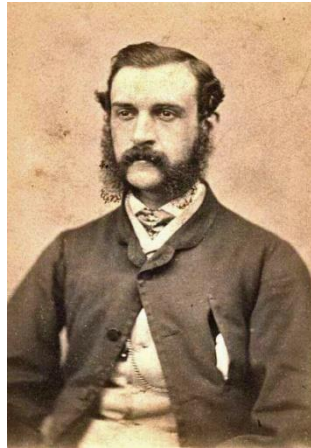
*Cranbrook, (Queenslander 13 October 1932.)*

### 19. Orleigh Park

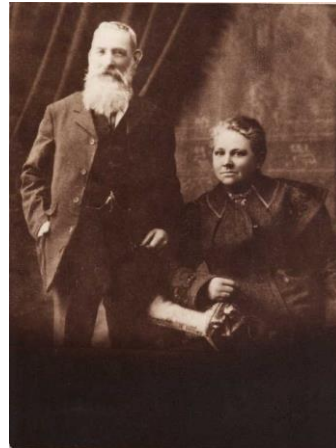
Land encompassing the future Orleigh Park was spread across two adjoining properties on land sold by the colonial government in the 1850s. It's an interesting comment on Australian society that two

neighbouring landowners, Wilkie and Coombe, came from the upper and lower levels respectively of the English class system.

John Perril Wilkie, came from a wealthy background. He held the leasehold to the 80,000 acre Daandine property near Dalby, as well as owning 55 acres of land surrounding us now. He built a large house that he named "Hill End," which gave its name to this location. Wilkie took his sons back to England to be educated but in his absence his properties were badly managed and he had to sell up.



John Perril Wilkie (ancestry.com)



Billy and daughter Elizabeth Coombe. (ancestry.com)

Billy Coombes was found guilty of stealing a fat sheep and transported to Australia in 1836 as a convict. After obtaining a ticket of leave, he purchased some 44 acres of farmland growing vegetables along what would become Montague Road and wheat near the ferry terminal. In 1853, he won a prize of £2 for the best cabbage at the 1853 Horticultural Show. The family later sold out and moved to 17 Mile Rocks.

With Brisbane rapidly growing and a land boom underway, both properties were eventually purchased by speculators and subdivided. The Hill End Estate went on sale in 1884, developed by Edward Drury, who named the street we are passing after himself. Manager of the Queensland National Bank, he was later found to have given himself and his secret business partner the premier Thomas McIlwraith large unsecured loans.

The adjoining Orleigh Estate was sold the year later. Many substantial houses were built along the river, some on double and triple allotments.

Many of the houses went underwater in the 1890 flood.





*Figure 2 Hill End during the 1890 flood (SLQ)*

The much greater 1893 flood swept away over 30 houses and the riverside land was abandoned by its owners.



*Orleigh Estate in 1893, showing remaining house stumps. (SLQ)*

Following community lobbying, the South Brisbane City Council purchased the vacant land and Orleigh Park was opened in 1917. In June of that year, local residents planted 24 weeping fig trees as memorials to the fallen in WW1. Most are still standing along the riverbank.

## **20. Gray Road**

We'll take a short detour up Morry Street to Gray Road where many 19<sup>th</sup> century have survived. The road started life as a private track leading to the Gray family's home *Orleigh* which was demolished in around 1981.

On the corner of Gray Road on our right is the two-story wooden home built in ca.1885 by architect Arthur Morry as his own residence. He was well known as a philanthropist, alderman and mayor of South Brisbane and as the local member of parliament. The house was named *Nassagaweya* by a later Canadian owner, John Gillies.

Next door is stately "*Rufford House*" built circa 1886 by Ormond Charles Smith - shareholder, director and a son of the founder of the Howard Smith shipping company. Ormond moved to Sydney in around 1902 while his wife Maria stayed in Brisbane and moved to close by Hardgrave Road. Soon after her death in 1921, Ormond married Charlotte Hanks, 34 years his junior.

The house was built facing the river and we are looking at its rear. A succession of owners gave the house a variety of names over the years, most recently "*Caithness*".



*Ormond Charles Smith*



*Maria Louisa Smith nee Eyers*

We head back down Hoogley Street to finish the walk.

## **21. Ferry and Bus Terminus**

A cross river ferry operated from here to Guyatt Park from 1916 until 1996, when it was replaced by the Citycat catamaran service. The tram line was extended down from the end of Dornoch Terrace in 1925 and was in operation until tram services ceased in Brisbane in 1969. From here, you have a choice of several bus services or ferry to take you back to Southbank or to the city.



*The West End ferry and tram terminus in 1969.(BCC)*

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## South Brisbane and West End Riverside History Walk



See my blog for more : [Highgate Hill and Its History](#)

Openstreetmap annotated by P. Granville