

Memories of the Avon River 1928 to 1960. before the Training Scheme.

This story is about how the river was used for recreation in that part from Burlong Pool upstream of Northam to Deepdale Pool downstream of the West Tordray river bend. It is long here and up to Boverly that big pools exist. In this stretch of river there were seven large and deep pools, fifteen feet or more in depth and up to seventy five yards in width. These with the shallower Northam Town Weir were the most used by folk for recreation.

Not much boating by grown-ups then, though the kids sometimes paddled about in their home made canoes, 'cobbled' up usually from a twelve foot length of corrugated roofing iron with the rear end broadened by fixing in an end panel of wood from a four gallon petrol tin container. These were not very safe contraptions and most of them sooner or later sank without trace, though I cannot recall that any of us were silly enough to get drowned for there were few who had not already learnt to swim. Only Dr. Hurrey had a safe punt at Millard.

It is well known that Burlong Pool was the main one used by Northam people and many hundreds of children learned to swim there up to 1939.

During the war years units from the Army Training camp took over and many of the troops did all sorts of training activities. This use then continued long after the end of the war years in 1945 until it finally silted up by 1970, but any swimming here had virtually been given up by Northam people by 1950. The river at Kutrins were also used for Army training 1940 to 1960.

In the 1930s, as now, the Northam Town Weir area was not much used for boating, even less swimming, most of it too shallow particularly following the very dry winters 1935 to 1944. Only one wet winter in this period was 1939 that flushed the whole river system, for the very severe flooding into Tordray in March 1943 from the Boyaging Brook / Kutrins area did not cause any flooding at Northam. The District Health Officer, Dr. Beamish had to have the Northam Weir area closed for swimming several times over summer up to 1944. Even then it was given over to the White Swans and plenty of other bird life.

With many people likely to be about these two pools no duck shooting was allowed except a little at the upper end of Burlong. However, at all the other pools down river this was a constant activity for an ever increasing number of duck hunters each 'open season' from Christmas to usually the end of March. And a few 'stray' shots at other times did occur.

For a number of people inclined to be fishermen there were places in all these large pools and a few smaller 'scour' pools in the 'braided', that is forested river bed sections between them. Often a good catch of 'bobbles', a freshwater cat-fish, could be made at night if you were 'in the know' where these places were. As the salinity of the river water rapidly increased after the 1945-46 floods their numbers dwindled away to very few by 1960. Also the introduced carp were killed off by 1950, this is probably a good result we now know. Anyway they even when plentiful were very difficult to catch by hook and line but easy to trap in backwaters by netting them in floods.

Downstream of Northam five to six kilometres there is 'Egoline' Pool about one kilometre long now totally silted up. Then a shorter pool you can still see from the Northern Rd, known as the 'Wash' Pool, this now also nearly full of sand. Both were used for swimming by the nearby farming families. Between the road and the river 1929 to 1932 growing tobacco was attempted by three Italian migrant families using water pumped from the Wash Pool. The product was not all that good as anyone who tried smoking a few batches of W.B. made 'Luxor' cigs it was used in. Well laced with salt with a touch of magnesean gave interesting results, enough to put off would be smokers for ever.

However back in the 'Egoline' pool one enthusiastic swimmer was Justin Walsh who would swim up and down this long pool three or four times without stopping. This had been part of his training before winning the Swim through Perth Co. 1928.

At Katrine Bridge (or Causeway as it is still known to we older people) can be seen 'Katrine' Pool upstream and 'Glen Iron' Pool downstream. Now they appear to be one pool at a common level but originally were two separate pools with a 'braided' section of river bed forest about one third of a kilometre long between them. Katrine pool is now largely silted up, Glen Iron not yet so badly. The Causeway was built by convict labour between 1853 and 1867.

Katrine, the name was originally spelt 'Katerine' by the early settlers. The name from the Aboriginal word 'Katta-ine', meaning a 'place of big hills'.

The Katrine pool was not much used for swimming, a bit at the top end which had some sand on the foreshore there. Some good 'bobbles' fishing spots were about this pool, and an easy access place for duck shooters to congregate at the beginning of the open season on Boxing day each year.

It was in the Glen Avon Pool that there were developed two places for swimming, one of these at the top end where the short bit of wooded forest ended. Here George Jessup a well known 'naturalist' who then lived in Northam would bring out on week-ends groups of mostly High School students, teach them something about the bush and have a great time 'mucking about' in the river. One of these was Harry Butler who, like so many other children learnt a lot about the bush from George, and came to know the river well both here and at West Toodyay. This place was used from about 1928 to 1939.

Down towards the bottom end below the Glen Avon homestead we had a jetty, diving springboard and a raft fixed out in the centre of the pool about seventy-five yards broad as it still is for most of its kilometre length. In summer most of the neighbours and many other friends came to swim here from 1920 to 1950. Two of these were Glee Jenkins (the G & H Jenkins who wrote wild-life articles for the West Australian newspaper for about sixty years). Another, Peter McMillan, an expert biologist in later life, all these whose parents were Toodyay or Northam residents will remember their early days of hunting for wild-life in the Avon, both here and elsewhere.

The next big pool down river is 'Millard's' Pool now held at the bottom end by Extracts Weir. Incidentally Glen Avon pool also is now retained by a weir. 'Millard's' is the longest pool of all and at the top end just up river of the old Ellery homestead close to the road was the place where the Toodyay Swimming Club had its facilities. There are a couple of old posts still there, part of the jetty, diving springboard and 'turningboards' set up for a fifty yard course in wheel to race. Then about fourteen feet deep here it is now silted up.

Mr Jim Ellery the owner of this land was a great sponsor of this public amenity from about 1928 to 1936 I think, though I was a member of the club only from 1934 to 1936 after coming home from school in Perth. At this time Northam had a swimming club at Burlong and there was another within the York townsite. There still is at both places a few posts left on the river's banks, those that held the diving boards. At least this was so when last seen in 1995. So it was that three times each summer/autumn, turn about, each club held a competitive carnival with quite a bit of rivalry between them. The Kingston family provided some of the best swimmers in the Toodyay club and Tom Drake-Brookman (the later Senator) a leading diving exponent.

Below Extracts Weir about half a kilometre is Lyodi Pool, then mostly referred to as 'Red Banks'. Unlike Millard, now considerably silted up, Red Banks has now scoured out into a much larger basin formation. It was the severe erosion here rapidly after the Training Scheme that forced the building of Extracts Weir in the late 1960s. I personally never swam here, never went to school in Toodyay, but from all accounts this was a handy place near Toodyay town where the kids could nip out to after school.

I did see it however after the great flood of March 1934. (This on the 9th March when the river rose fifteen feet over night.) The pool then was much narrower with at the bottom end some sand. Not the more usual fine silty mud often knee deep along all the foreshores in most places about the other pools. So here the local kids could scramble in and out without ending up smelling like pole-cats, for there were no nice showers provided before reaching home.

Finally the 'Deepdale' Pool, below West Toodyay, and close to the orange orchard, sometimes there were family picnics held in summer. Two or three times only in the late 1920s as a young boy I had a dip there. This was a beautiful place, quite a bit narrower than the bigger ones about Katrine with lots of shady trees on its banks. It too is mostly silted up.

There was virtually no permanent siltation of any pool before the Training Scheme except in Northam Weir, these pools were rejuvenated after each big winter flood.

So in the 1920s and 1930s children living along the river had learned to swim in it by the age of seven or eight. Both boys and girls had learnt all about its mud and leeches on their legs, and to be wary of how steeply these pools shelved off into deep water. Home a hot day and back we went for more.

Certainly the quality of the river water had deteriorated a lot by the 1950s much worse after the great flood in February of 1955. By then also outflow from the Northam sewerage system did not help one little bit in spite of farming lucerne there.

But for we now very old people who knew the Avon River as it was sixty or more years ago it engendered in us a regard and respect for its many moods and the wonders of the wild-life it supports and still can do with care.

You would never learn this in a 'fined' swimming pool.

Jim R Masters
Glen Avon 28th November 1998.