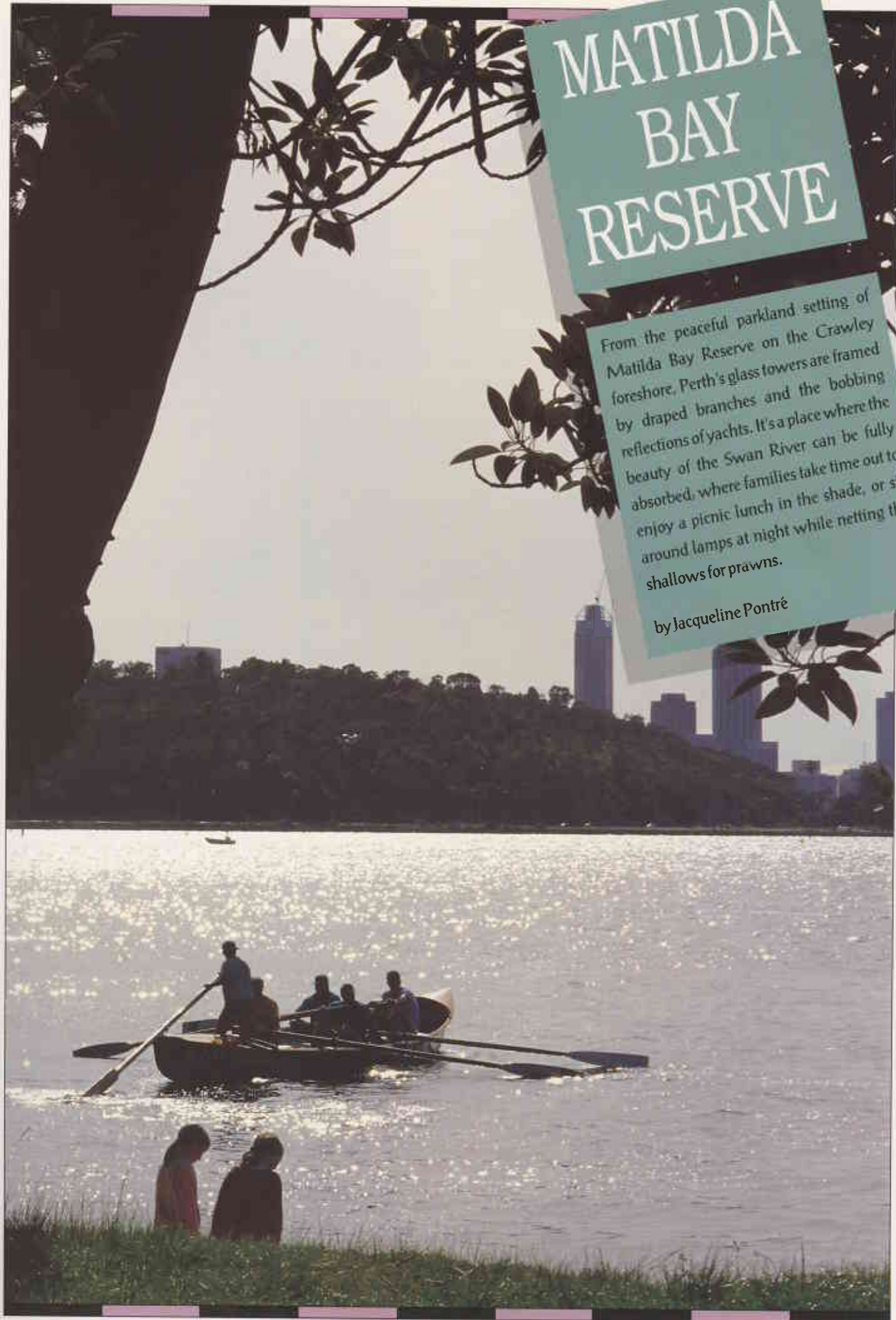


# MATILDA BAY RESERVE

From the peaceful parkland setting of Matilda Bay Reserve on the Crawley foreshore, Perth's glass towers are framed by draped branches and the bobbing reflections of yachts. It's a place where the beauty of the Swan River can be fully absorbed, where families take time out to enjoy a picnic lunch in the shade, or sit around lamps at night while netting the shallows for prawns.

by Jacqueline Pontré



**M**atilda Bay, named after the wife of Sir John Septimus Roe, the first Surveyor-General of Western Australia, is a thin strip of land between Hackett Drive and the Swan River's low water mark on the Crawley foreshore. Managed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), the reserve's primary purpose is for recreation, and it extends from Mounts Bay Road just north of Cygnet Hall to just south of the windsurfing ramp past Pelican Point, covering 20.6 hectares.

Matilda Bay lies adjacent to the University of Western Australia, the Swan River, Pelican Point Reserve, part of the Swan Estuary Marine Park, J.H. Abrahams Reserve and the Nedlands Foreshore Reserve. It was an important riverine and estuarine area for Aboriginal people for thousands of years, and was known as Godroo, Gurndandalup or Goodamioorup. It was favoured by Aboriginal people because of its abundance of fish, and water holes situated in the Pelican Point area, including the current reserve. Hot water springs were located where the

University of Western Australia now stands and Aboriginal people used the area as a battle ground. The traditional Aboriginal custodians were the Ballaruk, who inhabited the area around the Swan River (see *Hunters and Gatherers* in this issue).

In 1829 Matilda Bay was part of a block of 32 acres taken up by Captain Mark Currie, Fremantle's first harbourmaster. Captain Currie was one of the official party from the sailing ship *Parmelia* which arrived off Fremantle in 1829. Captain Currie remained on the Crawley property for a few years with his wife, during which time two children were born. The only accommodation

they had were tents, and they lived under primitive conditions, drawing water from a well they dug.

In 1837 ownership passed to Henry Sutherland, originally a surveyor and later Colonial Treasurer, who built the two-storey dwelling which still stands. In 1875, the Crawley Estate passed to Sir George Shenton, a Member of the Legislative Council and Mayor of Perth, who lived on the estate until his death in 1909.

In 1910, the State Government resumed the property for public recreation, turning the foreshore into a camping ground. This was served by a tramline from the city which hugged the river's edge all the way to Nedlands Baths. The University of Western Australia acquired the bulk of the land in 1914 and Shenton's former home became the quarters of the Engineering school. The building, the oldest on the University campus, currently houses the University Chaplaincy.

The river landscape changed dramatically between the 1920s and 1940s because of public works programs. Extensive dredging of the shallows

**Previous page:**

A moody Perth framed by the branches of a tree in the reserve.

Photo - Allan Padgett

Perth's skyline and afternoon sailing are part of the view from Matilda Bay.

Photo - Robert Garvey







adjacent to Pelican Point's north side resulted in considerable landfill on the Point's south side, and increased the land area by four or five times. The larger part of the current land of Pelican Point was originally lagoon or river shallows.

During World War II, the Commonwealth Government requisitioned the foreshore reserve for defence purposes. Numerous existing features, such as the ablution blocks, owe their location to the military pipelines, sewerage and power systems.

Two bases for Catalina flying boats were established in the Crawley area after Japan entered the war in December 1941. (Indeed, the world's longest rescue mission was mounted with aircraft from Matilda Bay.) An Australian base, now known as the Qantas Ramp, was established west of Pelican Point. The American Navy established a base at Matilda Bay where Mounts Bay Sailing Club and Royal Perth Yacht Club now stand.

The Royal Perth Yacht Club launching ramp was built to launch the Catalinas, with hangars on the boat servicing area. Other foreshore buildings, including the University boatshed, were also used by the Navy during the war. Some of the University's nearby buildings were occupied by servicemen.

According to a spectator, 'the Catalina take-offs were a dramatic affair, with patrol boats racing ahead of the aircraft to remove floating debris. Then the heavily laden planes, often four tonnes overweight with extra fuel, roared into the wind, leaving a fan-shaped wake behind them as they gradually gained height like overweight pelicans.'

**Above left:**

The University Boat Club at sunrise.

Photo - Allan Padgett

**Above right:**

The University of Western Australia lies adjacent to Matilda Bay and students frequent the reserve and its shores during the week.

Photo - Robert Garvey

**Right:**

Stately trees planted earlier this century create a tranquil river setting.

Photo - David Gough



The Catalina route covered more than 3 500 miles of the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The planes carried mainly documents, mail, service chiefs and civilian VIPs.

## A BAY OF SAILS

Leases located on Matilda Bay Reserve today include yacht and rowing clubs, a restaurant and kiosk. CALM also has two offices on the reserve, one on Australia II Drive and the other in Cygnet Hall near Mounts Bay Road.

Perth Dinghy Sailing Club, established in 1903, was originally located near the Barrack Street Jetty before moving to Matilda Bay in 1960. Royal Perth Yacht Club, established in 1865, was also originally located near the Barrack Street jetty, but moved to Matilda Bay in 1953. In 1979 the club organised the Parmelia race from Plymouth to Fremantle to commemorate the 150th anniversary of British settlement on the Swan River, and in 1983 the club won the America's Cup,

mounting an unsuccessful Cup defence in 1987.

Mounts Bay Sailing Club was founded in 1897 and built its first clubhouse in 1939. During World War II the building was used by the United States Navy. Two rowing clubs are also situated on the reserve. Cygnet Hall was built in 1956 by the Governors of Hale School as the base for the school's rowing club, and today CALM's Corporate Relations Division is situated in office space above the rowers. The University Boat Club was opened on the reserve in 1929 and today provides a range of water activities for university students.

The 1st Pelican Point Sea Scouts, originally known as the 1st WA Sea Scouts, was established in Albany in 1913 and moved to Perth in the 1920s to be located briefly in Irwin Street, before moving to floating headquarters, the *Dolphin*, a wooden coastal steamer moored near the location of the present University Boat Club. In 1926 the group moved to its present area located at the



**Left:**  
Water, sun, sails and cappuccino are part of the reserve's appeal.  
Photo - Allan Padgett

**Below left:**  
An aerial view of the Royal Perth Yacht Club.  
Photo - Robert Garvey



end of a narrow spit of land known then as Point Currie. New headquarters were built in 1957 on land filled in from pre-war dredging of Matilda Bay.

The restaurant and kiosk are favourite venues for both locals and tourists. More than 40 per cent of the restaurant's patronage is from interstate and overseas. The reserve attracts about 400 000 visitors each year. This figure includes people who visit the restaurant (about 50 000 a year) and the yacht clubs (about 250 000 a year), as well as visitors using the reserve for passive or active recreation (about 100 000 a year). Public holidays are the busiest. Matilda Bay also becomes a focus for special events such as the 96m skyshow, an annual fireworks display, and regattas, and in summer the reserve is also used by corporate organisations for parties of up to 300 people. Organisers of sport.ing

events, such as marathons, occasionally use the reserve as a stopping point.

### TREES FOR ALL REASONS

Early photographs and paintings of Matilda Bay show there was a predominance of saltwater paperbark (*Melaleuca cuticularis*) and freshwater paperbark (*M. raphiophylla*) along the riverfront backed by flooded gum (*Eucalyptus rudis*). While naturally occurring plants are still found on the adjacent Pelican Point Nature Reserve south of Australia II Drive, including grey stinkwood (*Jacksonia furcellata*), coojong (*Acacia saligna*), flooded gum and saltwater paperbark, very few of these are now found north of Australia II Drive.

Instead, the reserve is now largely planted with exotic trees. These include a drift of *Leptospermum laevigatum*

along the central foreshore and a remarkable group of trees opposite Shenton House. In this group is a native species from the State's tropical north-west, *Albizia procera*, and pegunny (*Lysiphyllum hookeri*), an Australian tree from the arid parts of the north-east coast of Queensland and the Northern Territory. The wood of this tree is used to make xylophones.

Also in this group is a magnificent 'Pride of Bolivia' (*Tipuana tipu*), which produces unusual ash-like fruit with a long projectile wing and nut-like seed; a mature specimen of the South African tulip tree (*Spathodia campanulata*); a mature *Agafus robusta* (one of Queensland's unique gymnosperms), and another Queensland tree, the bunya bunya pine (*Araucaria bidwillii*). In Aboriginal culture each bunya bunya pine had a custodian who was responsible for its fertility. This custodial ownership is known to be handed down from generation to generation by Aboriginal people.

According to Professor George Seddon from the University of Western Australia, Matilda Bay Reserve is the westernmost occurrence of the alluvial soils of the Swan system and this explains why it is capable of supporting trees that do not thrive in the coastal suburbs of Perth.

Very little is known about the history of the tree plantings on Matilda Bay. Some people believe the existing trees were planted in colonial times when settlers wanted to recreate the landscapes of England, but historic photographs refute this theory. Another hypothesis put forward by Professor Seddon is that





most of the trees were planted in the 1920s by the University of Western Australia's head gardener, Oliver Dowell, at the behest of William Somerville, who occupied various positions on the University Senate between 1914 and 1955.

Each year on Arbor Day, CALM ceremoniously plants a native tree on the reserve with the help of Perth schoolchildren during a festival to celebrate the role of trees in the environment. In the future, a wider range of endemic native plant species will be encouraged in the area south of Australia II Drive to create visual continuity with the vegetation on Pelican Point Nature Reserve, while historic exotic trees will be preserved on the rest of the reserve.

## PLANNING AHEAD

Matilda Bay's fascinating history and natural values will be explained in interpretative material planned for the reserve, and developments such as new picnic facilities, and toilets for use by disabled people are to be undertaken.

The challenge for managers of the reserve will be to improve its facilities for use by an increasing number of people while preserving its special character. □



**Top:**  
Sunrise at Matilda Bay.  
Photo - Allan Padgett

**Above:**  
The reserve is a favourite spot for family and friends to get together for special occasions.  
Photo - Allan Padgett

*Jacqueline Pontre is a planning officer based at CALM's Mt Pleasant office. She can be contacted on (09) 364 0777. Much of the historical account was obtained from the Western Australian Historical Society by CALM's Debbie Bowra, and Marion Blackwell identified the reserve's exotic tree species.*

# LANDSCOPE

VOLUME EIGHT NO. 1 SPRING ISSUE 1992



Small and shy and quite unlike their exotic, urban cousins, high climbing rodents live throughout the Kimberley. See page 10.



Once it was a traditional battleground for Aboriginal people. Today the competition is between sailboarders while families of picnickers look on. See page 23.



The various groups of Aboriginal people around the Swan River lived in harmony with the seasons. See page 28.



His name is connected with plants and places around Australia. He was interested in everything from Aboriginal customs to the size of trees. Read about A Man of Science on page 16.



Learn about the incredible variety of orchids in the Stirling Range. See page 36.

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## COVER

The many coloured orchid (*Caledonia polychroma*) is well named. Aside from the rich pinks there are clumps of lemon yellow and pure white. The orchid is found in the low areas of the Stirling Range, preferring wandoo and sheoak woodlands. While most years its vibrant flowers can be seen, it flowers best after fire. The illustration is by Phillipa Nikulinsky.



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