

# UNEARTHING THE UNDERGROUND

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History and heritage are accrued in layers. Whether a fresh coat of paint over old or the redirection of a stream, understanding change starts with recognizing, reading and deciphering the various layers. Of course, the greater the passing of time the more layers are usually hidden beneath the surface. Sometimes heritage is hidden from the outset, out of sight and very much out of mind. Knowing it's even there may be a challenge, but a greater challenge can come when you want to share the story of that heritage. How do you best communicate the value of something that is unseen, even if it is right under your feet?

The issue of interpreting hidden heritage came to the fore with a recent project at Rippon Lea Estate. What started as a rather prosaic undertaking to repair ageing nineteenth century drainage pipes grew to encompass much more. The drainage system, developed for Frederick Sargood over the 1870s and 1880s, is part of a larger system that harvests, stores, irrigates and drains water across the property. As a result of a visionary system and a significant engineering feat, the fourteen acres of garden are independent of mains water supply. Maintaining the drainage infrastructure, however, required our gardeners to descend old brick pits 3 to 4m deep with a large corkscrew to remove tree roots from the ageing pipes, sometimes extracting a python-like mass 7 or 8 metres long. This work was becoming increasingly difficult and dangerous and relining the pipes was one of the only feasible solutions for fixing it. The original pipes will now continue to function for many years to come, and relining meant no destructive digging or trenching was required. The project was made possible through a federal government Australian Heritage Grant and the support of the Rippon Lea Endowment Fund and National Trust sponsor The Drain Man.

Whilst relining the pipes was relatively straight forward, telling the story of Sargood's remarkable irrigation and drainage system was an equally important element of the project. We always knew we had an exceptional example of what would now be called a 'best practice' integrated water management system, 150 years ahead of its time. The question was, how to reveal something that is largely buried and bring it into sight? Progress came as we understood we had more than an engineering feat to interpret, indeed something that is part of a much larger story with many and varied layers.

Water at Rippon Lea does not exist in isolation. Few people today realise the southeast of Melbourne was a naturally wet and swampy area. Large expanses of seasonally inundated land and swamps occurred in catchments of the Elster and Gardiners Creek and beyond. One significant example, a few kilometres to the east of Rippon Lea and once known as Paddy's Swamp, is Caulfield Park. As the natural landscape of Melbourne gave way to colonial development, water was regarded not only as a resource but in some instances as a problem to be solved. Natural waterways were diverted and redirected. The wet and swampy areas of the southeast were drained, and the stormwater system used to carry them to the bay, now hidden below ground, while a city was built above them. At Rippon Lea,

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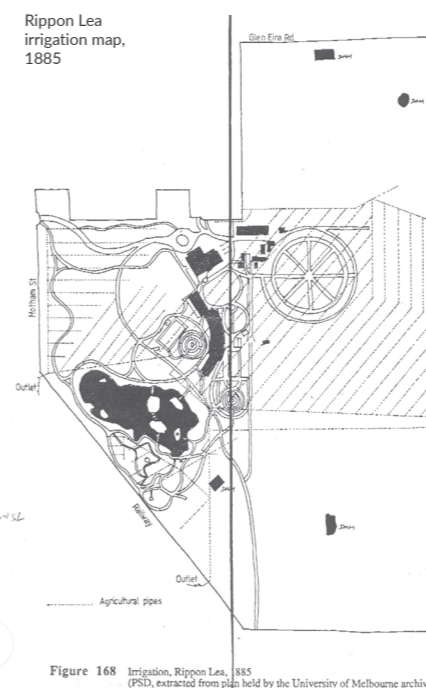
Outdoor images: Rippon Lea Estate, by Claire Takacs

Frederick Sargood installed a virtual labyrinth of underground pipes to drain soil that was periodically subject to natural inundation. He then harnessed the resource by harvesting and storing water to sustain his passion project, a 14-acre garden. The ornamental lake was built to store this water, utilising a naturally wet spot dotted with river red gums and holding several megalitres of water for irrigation.

Placing Rippon Lea in this wider context, we were fortunate to partner with a team from Monash University whose research centres not only on the historical waterways and geology of the southeast flood plain, but also interpreting hidden heritage. The team immediately recognised the synergy with our drainage project and were commissioned to develop an interpretation plan.

Fundamentally, and most importantly, water is a key element in tracing the cultural heritage of the lands Rippon Lea occupies. The Monash team have been building an 'underground atlas' of Melbourne that focuses on these historical waterways and their significance to Traditional Owners. The team recorded interviews with Boon Wurrung elder Dr N'arweet Carolyn Briggs AM at Rippon Lea and her insights form a key part of the interpretation.

Despite the altered and contrived nature of water at Rippon Lea today, it plays a key role in supporting the biodiversity and environmental values



of the area. Identified as a top 5 biodiversity hotspot within the City of Glen Eira, the birdlife in particular is highly regarded due to the large body of water itself and the garden it sustains. The complex structure of the garden allows for many more species to coexist than is possible elsewhere, even in larger parks nearby. For example, the Noisy Miner, a native bird with very aggressive tendencies that monopolises space at the expense of other species, has been unable to establish itself at Rippon Lea. These birds favour eucalypt forest with little understorey growth; the essential template for urban parkland which has been followed for many years. The many structural niches provided by garden beds and shrubberies at Rippon Lea, coupled with the large variety of plant species, allow many more birds to flourish. The reliability of water supply further ensures the population. Placing the property within an even wider context, the lake is also home to the shortfin eel. These remarkable animals spawn and start life thousands of kilometres away in the Coral Sea, somehow finding their way to the lake at Rippon Lea via currents, the Bay, stormwater pipes and a possible overland journey.

As a means of telling these stories, the Monash team have also developed an augmented reality app that will be available to download on site. Via a smart phone, visitors will be able to follow the flow of water to key areas of the property where they will be guided through sounds



that make up these many layers of history and life within the garden – part soundscape, part x-ray vision. A deeper dive into the water stories of Rippon Lea will also be available through the website. No doubt, our knowledge of these stories will develop further and we will continue to reveal more of what is otherwise hidden.

