

Wolli Creek Update

PO Box 270, Earlwood NSW 2206

MARCH 2001

Wolli Creek Regional Park Draft Plan of Management and Masterplan

A good plan can be improved!

The National Parks and Wildlife Service draft Plan of Management and Masterplan for Wolli Creek Regional Park went on display on 12 February and will remain on display until Monday 26 March.

This is indeed a historic moment. We are now close to the declaration of Wolli Creek Regional Park and the resolution of more than twenty years of struggle to protect the Wolli Valley's bush and open space!

Enclosed with this newsletter you'll find a letter now being circulated by the NPWS. It details the locations where you can inspect the plans and the address for response. The Society's committee urges you to inspect the plan and to comment on it.

The Preservation Society committee is very impressed with the plan and we believe our members should, in general, support it. However we believe that in specific areas it could be strengthened and improved.

We are impressed by:

- The overall emphasis on passive recreation, habitat protection, bush regeneration and measures to improve water quality.
- The emphasis on public transport as the preferred way for the public to access the park.
- The proposals (although as yet rather conceptual) for the redesign and redevelopment of Turrella Reserve.
- The emphasis on the need to create a "theme" or "vocabulary" for the park's signage and interpretation

Please donate to M5 East Stack Campaign !

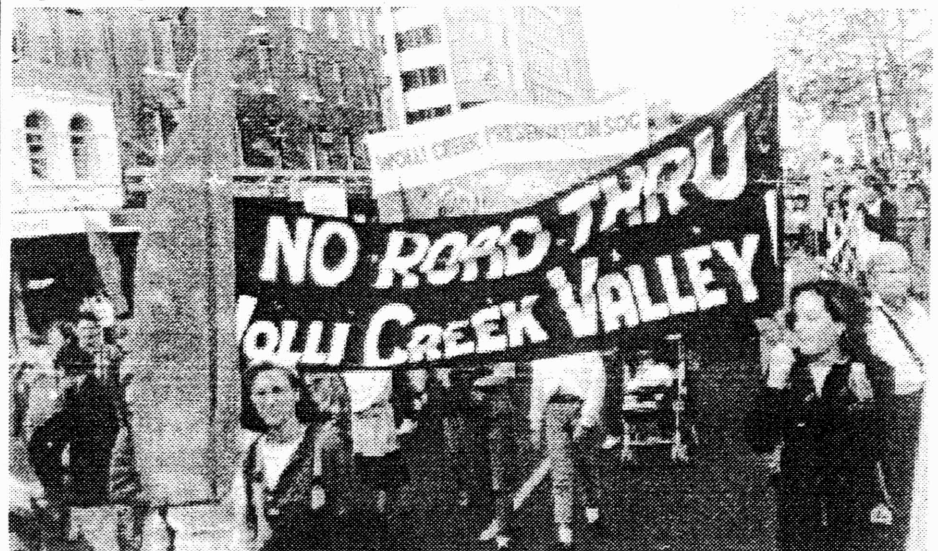
The fight to have the Turrella exhaust stack filtered has entered a new phase with RAPS fighting to raise \$35,000 for a legal challenge. A highly successful meeting on 26 February saw residents indignantly rejecting the government's miserable compensation offer. RAPS, formerly a sub-committee of WCPS is now an

incorporated organisation in its own right.

RAPS meets 7.30pm every Tuesday at the Earlwood-Bardwell Park Bowling Club, Doris Ave, Earlwood. All are welcome.

- Phone: 1800 614 603.
- Website: <http://nostack.8m.com/>
- Email: savewollicreek@email.com

Sydney's longest-running conservation battle



Whatever it takes ... the fight to save the Wolli Creek Valley from the freeway threat began in the late 1970s and until 1996 when the NSW Government decided to put the M5 East underground to avoid the valley. The fight to save Wolli is often spoken of as Sydney's longest-running conservation battle.

which will give it coherence, considering its linear nature and multitude of access points.

We see problems arising in the following areas:

■ Creek-bank access

An emphasis on creek-bank access for users which is potentially detrimental to wildlife. Human access to the water's edge needs to be balanced with wildlife habitat protection. It is critically important that long stretches of creek bank remain secluded and protected from human intrusion. Human visitors should be accommodated by access

at scenic locations rather than along the length of the creek banks and this access should be designed to minimise disturbance to wildlife. In this respect the plan should not accommodate the proposed RTA cycleway which would travel along the south bank of Wolli Creek (and a stretch of the north bank near Turrella) to the extent that it does.

■ 'Shared' pathways

We have reservations about a proposal for "shared footpath/recreational cyclepath[s] in some parts of the park" (although not for a children's recreational cyclepath at Turrella). Shared cyclepaths are likely to become, over time, high-speed commuter cycle routes and therefore dangerous for pedestrians, including children.

■ Pedestrian path

The large draft masterplan map depicts a walking track running through secluded heathland habitat between Turrella Reserve and the quarry just west of Jackson Place.

We believe any track in this area should follow the existing track and leave the heathland as undisturbed habitat.

■ Wildlife migration corridor

There should be more emphasis on the role of the valley as a wildlife migration corridor. The evidence is that many species of birds now use the valley as a migration route through Sydney because urban areas are largely denuded of native vegetation and are therefore difficult and hostile for them to negotiate. Examples of birds migrating through the valley in increasing numbers are the topknot pigeon and the yellow-faced honeyeater.

■ Species reintroduction

The possibility of reintroducing species of valley's original flora and fauna which are now locally extinct should be investigated. After European settlement, much of the valley was denuded of native vegetation and this, in turn, led to fauna disappearing. One example is the cabbage tree palm, an important food tree for many birds (including, for example, topknot pigeons, a migratory rainforest species). Natural habitat regrowth as well as active bush regeneration means suitable habitat for some faunal species is once again present. Examples are brown antechinus (a mouse-sized marsupial insectivore), brown quail, whipbird and ringtail possum.

■ Management of Wollie Creek

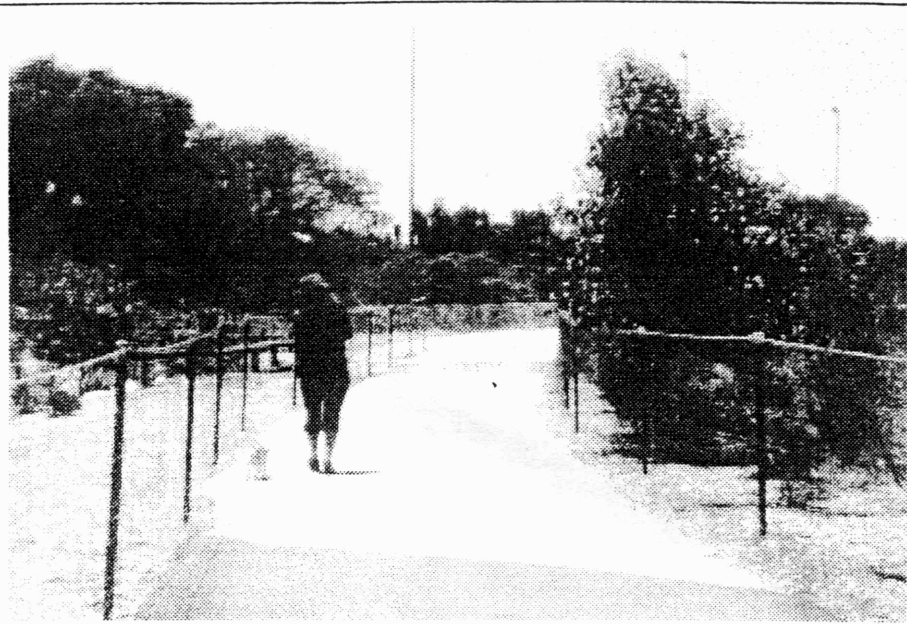
Wollie Creek itself is not part of the park. This is a big problem. The management of the creek, including its south bank, which is outside the park's boundary, is not adequately catered for. The Plan of Management should specify a protocol for the NPWS to manage the creek, including its south bank, in collaboration with the other agencies such as Rail Access.

■ The M5 East stack

There is a basic conflict between public parkland and an unfiltered exhaust stack which will pump the exhaust pollution from 60,000 vehicles per day into the Wollie Valley's environment when the M5 East Tunnel opens. The plan should more adequately acknowledge that, unless the stack is filtered, air pollution will become an issue for park users. Although it is outside the park's boundary, the stack will be a dominating element of the landscape. Ameliorating this aesthetic impact has not been addressed in the draft. It should be.

■ Education campaigns

The plan should outline education campaigns to encourage residents to compliment the park's work to improve water quality and enhance wildlife habitat.



This 'mixed use' cycleway runs close to the east side of Lake Monger in Perth. At 3 metres wide, it's narrower than the 3.5 - 4 m cycleway the RTA wants to build on the south bank of Wollie Creek between Bexley North and Turrella. The draft Wollie Park Plan of Management leaves the way open for mixed use paths through Wollie Park itself. Because of the dangers associated with mixing high-speed cycle traffic with walkers (many with dogs on leads) and children, part of the length of the Monger cycleway has been duplicated by a separate pedestrian only path nearly 2 m wide between the lake's edge and the cycleway shown here.

Creek-side cycleways versus wildlife habitat and passive recreation

It is fair to say that the draft plan of management has taken an unnecessarily ambivalent position on the issue of cycleways traversing Wollie Park.

Although we strongly support the establishment of cycleways, we fear the advent of commuter cycleways through the park or along the banks of Wollie Creek outside the park for the very reason that we believe cycle commuting will become (and, indeed, ought to become) increasingly popular.

Motions from the Australian Association of Bush Regenerators and the Wollie Creek Preservation Society passed at the Nature Conservation Council conference in October, committed the NCC to opposing the extension of creek-side cyclepaths.

Cycling is bound to grow in the next decade. The price of petrol will be a key factor. Prices are bound to rise at an ever-increasing rate because the world is using oil five times faster than it is discovering new reserves.

What may begin as a lightly-used cycleway will rapidly develop into a major commuting route and there will then be pressure to widen this route, to the detriment of passive recreation and wildlife habitat, which are the primary and irreplaceable reasons for the park's existence.

The Roads and Traffic Authority and its client group, Bicycle NSW, are strongly pursuing the establishment of a commuter cycleway through the Wollie Creek Valley. There is a world of difference between a low-speed mixed-use recreational pathway open to cyclists and walkers and a commuter cycleway designed for high-volume traffic which is what the RTA and bicycle NSW want to build.

Cycling should be encouraged and accommodated on the existing road system and where appropriate on unused and available rail easements but not where creek or river edges are severely impacted.

The Birdman of Wollie Creek

When, in the late 1970s, the Department of Main Roads proposed to build the F5 Freeway through the Wollie Creek bushland it reckoned without local opponents of the calibre of Neil Rankin.

Many knew him from his appearances in the media as “the Birdman of Wollie Creek”, but few realised that before he threw himself into the 20 year fight that saved our bush valley he had already spent a lifetime as a teacher, headmaster and school inspector.

Aubrey Neil Rankin was born on a dairy farm at Bangalow near Lismore and attended the one-teacher school at Nashua before going on to Lismore High. In 1942 he enrolled at Armidale Teachers College (in order to secure a post-war place in education) and promptly caught the next train to Sydney to enlist in the Army.

After infantry training, and some time spent with the Army Education Corps, Neil saw action in the 1944–45 Solomon Islands campaign, serving in the lonely and hazardous role of coastwatcher behind the Japanese lines on Bougainville.

He returned on the troopship *Kanimbla* in 1945, together with a cache of American beer he had found buried in the jungle, and remained drunk for the entire voyage.

It was a typically larrikin gesture, but his experiences had left a legacy of medical problems and nightmares. Nevertheless he returned to Armidale Teachers college, graduated Dux in 1948 and was first appointed to Crookwell Rural School, in the Southern Highlands. Here he met his future wife, Danni—a fellow teacher—and played a role in the 1949 miners’ strike.

A committed left-wing socialist, he had been elected secretary of the Crookwell Labour League and when the Chifley Labour Government moved to break the strike he stood by the miners. His temerity attracted the wrath of ALP head office which organised a special branch meeting to expel him. “We don’t know who you blokes in suits are, but Rankin stays”, said the first miner to speak. And he did.

In 1950 his enthusiasm, rapport with



youth and talent for teaching were recognised when he was appointed to the prestigious North Newtown Demonstration School. Simultaneously, he enrolled at Sydney University as an evening student, his BA being awarded in 1954. A school inspector’s report from this period characterised his teaching as “strongly motivated, well adjusted and penetrative”.

As he moved up the ranks in the NSW education system, Neil developed a special interest in children with learning difficulties, served on many committees devoted to the problem, and became a frequent lecturer at in-service courses.

In 1960 he was appointed headmaster at Parramatta’s Hassell Street Special School, and went on to become principal of Green Valley Primary and North Sydney Demonstration School where the inspector’s notes report: “Modern in outlook and enthusiastic to a degree, he has given his staff strong leadership and a sense of sharing in the most important of all enterprises”. He had not forgotten his socialist principles, and in 1969 he was a key witness when the Teachers Federa-

tion wage case came before the Industrial Commission.

In 1973 he became Inspector of Schools for the Campbelltown district, a difficult and rapidly expanding patch, which he administered with distinction and innovation, introducing to Australia the community school concepts he had travelled to Europe to investigate. Even as a senior bureaucrat he remained a non-conformist, sometimes wearing bib and brace overalls to work.

The death of his son in 1979 brought a profound note of sadness into Neil’s life. Peter Rankin, a talented young herpetologist, died in New Caledonia after falling from the rainforest canopy while on a collecting expedition with the Australian Museum.

Neil’s response was typically practical and youth-oriented: he and Danni raised the money to found the Peter Rankin Fund. Today it is the richest administered by the Museum, awarding grants to young herpetologists for research into Australia’s lizards, snakes and frogs.

Neil retired in 1982 when his growing involvement in ornithology coincided with the fight to save the Wollie Valley from the freeway menace. The Rankin home in Finlays Avenue, Earlwood, is a short walk from the valley’s bush and Neil kept daily records of bird species, merging them with earlier records of the pioneer ornithologist Arnold McGill. In 1989 the Society published the result as *Birds of Wollie Creek*. Neil also served on the committee of the Wollie Creek Preservation Society, lobbied politicians, letterboxed the neighbourhood and took school groups through the valley. The imminent dedication of the Wollie Regional Park will be a fitting legacy.

Neil is survived by Danni and their sons Bruce and Phillip.

■ GAVIN GATENBY

Will the Heritage Council stand up for Tempe?

As this edition of *Update* went to press we were still awaiting the outcome of a meeting of the Heritage Council's approvals committee which met on Tuesday 6 March to consider the developer's masterplan for North Arncliffe.

The Interciti scheme involves a semi-circular wall of apartments running from the edge of Princes Highway to the bank of the Cooks River. This wall of glass and concrete, from 6 to 11 storeys tall, would cut so close behind Tempe House that it would prevent it from being surrounded by a substantial grove of trees, which was the "romantic garden" effect achieved by its designer, John Verge and its first owner, Alexander Brodie Spark.

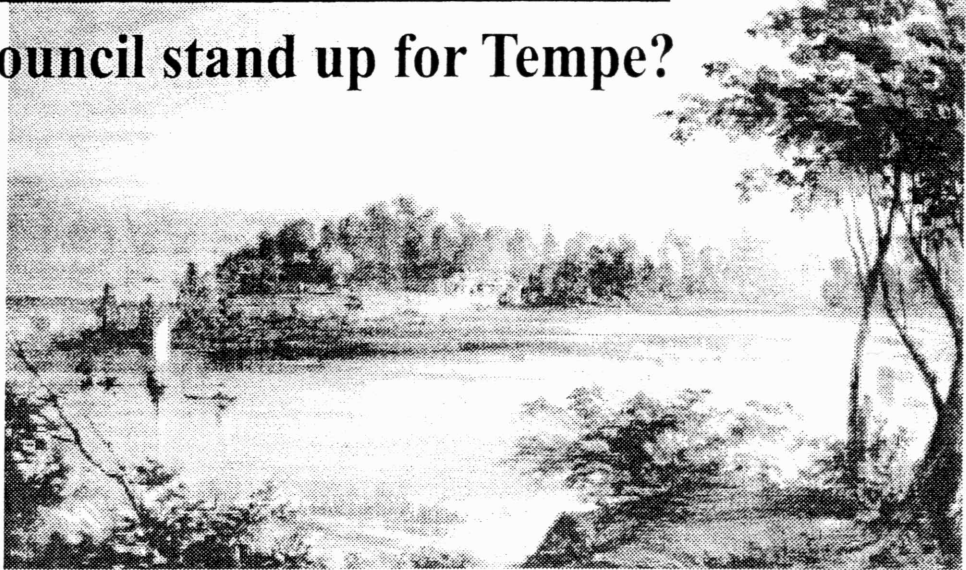
Under the Interciti proposal, the south side of the rocky knoll called Mount Olympus would be hacked down and the area excavated to a depth of three storeys. In the process three very old eucalypts will be axed. According to Doug Benson of the Botanic Gardens, they may be as much as 200 years old, and would therefore have been a feature of Brodie Spark's garden. Regardless of age they are a very rare remnant of the vegetation community of the lower Cooks River Valley and of great botanical importance.

The developers recently tried to discount the importance of these trees by using an aerial photo allegedly taken in 1939 (the photo itself is marked "1943"). They say the photo shows that Mt Olympus was "virtually denuded" of vegetation at the time, and that, therefore, the trees are only regrowth and of little significance.

Analysis of the photo shows that the developer's spin doctors know nothing about air-photo interpretation. The three trees are certainly present and the long shadows they cast indicate they were almost as tall when the photo was taken as they are now! We have also found other old photos which show the trees.

Tempe House is one of Australia's most important heritage buildings. As all the experts have affirmed, its importance lies not in the building itself (as magnificent a piece of architecture as it is) but as a house within a garden context.

Professor Bernard Smith – surely Australia's most



Tempe House in its original setting, as painted by Conrad Martens in 1838. The Interciti proposal would remove forever the opportunity for the public to appreciate the house in its romantic garden. Below: Tempe House today.

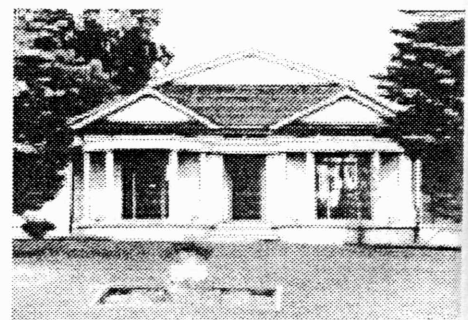
eminent art historian – expressed it this way in a personal appeal to Premier Bob Carr:

"You will, I am sure, know that all the great houses of Britain are crucially enhanced by their garden settings. If the setting is destroyed the house tends to take on the features of a loveable but grotesque oddity, flypapered onto a 20th or 21st century world ..."

If the Heritage Council has found the courage to resist enormous pressure from the developer, Rockdale Council, and the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning and has rejected at least the building on "Site 1" at the rear of Tempe House it will be something of a miracle and deserving of conditional praise.

What can you do?

Letters to politicians are very important! In particular we suggest you write to Premier Bob Carr and express your outrage over the Interciti proposal and your support for saving the grounds of Tempe House for the nation. We enclose with this newsletter a copy of an excellent article on from the February edition



of *Reflections*, the National Trust magazine, which you might use as a source of facts and inspiration.

Stay tuned through our web site: www.brushtail.com.au/wolli.creek.html

If you wish to get involved in the campaign please ring Gavin Gatenby on 041 767 4080.

Contacting the Premier:

Write to:
The Hon. Bob Carr, MP,
Parliament House, Macquarie Street,
Sydney 2000
or fax him at 9228 3933.

Wolli Creek Preservation Society Inc.

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