



## Noxious trades

Pollution of waterways became a severe problem in the early settlement leading to noxious industries being outlawed from the population centre of Sydney by government regulation. In 1883, a Commission of Inquiry was set up to examine Sydney's noxious trades. Wolli Creek farms were described as *'the filthiest ever seen'* and strong reservations expressed about the smell and noxious liquids draining into Wolli Creek.

Diseases such as typhoid and gastro-enteritis were common amongst residents living along waterways. Local resident, John Curtis, stated *'there is no doubt that Wolli Creek is filled up, compared with what it was twenty-five or thirty years ago. At that time an old resident living next to my place [at the junction of Bardwell Creek] used to go in his boat down the creek, but at the present time I could walk across Wolli Creek in many places, even after rain...'*

# Catchment

Wolli Creek and its tributary, Bardwell Creek, form the second largest sub-catchment of the Cooks River catchment covering 15.52 km<sup>2</sup>.

Looking at the creek today, it is hard to imagine that, in the late 1800s, it was one of the most polluted waterways in Sydney.

Water flowing through the Wolli Creek Valley contains the run-off from all the industrial and residential developments in the whole of the catchment before it flows into the Cooks River at Tempe. This has a major impact on the water quality in Wolli Creek.

In the past, building of dams, clearing of natural vegetation, noxious trades and channeling of waterways within hard surfaces all contributed to problems such as siltation, flooding and pollution.

Today increased public awareness and action by local councils, the Sydney Metropolitan Catchment Management Authority (SMCMA), government agencies and community organisations is leading to an overall improvement in water quality. Projects being undertaken include the treatment of stormwater with gross pollutant traps, artificial wetlands and rain gardens.

Supported by Rockdale Council, SMCMA and Sydney Water, WCPS has established Streamwatch groups to undertake monthly water quality monitoring on the creek. Local schools are also encouraged to take part.

## MISTAKES OF THE PAST

In 1838, the government built a sandstone dam across Cooks River at Tempe to provide fresh water for farmers on the lower Cooks River. It took 200 convicts two years to build, but proved to be an environmental disaster. The porous sandstone dam let the salt water through making it unsuitable for drinking. Flood gates built to help manage the severe floods in the Cooks River and Wolli Creek were not a success. Finally, in 1962 the dam and flood gates were completely removed.

## Floods

Farmers along the steep banks of Wolli Creek experienced disastrous floods made worse by the dam constructed at Tempe. Poultry farms and markets gardens were lost, along with the rickety bridges they constructed to cross the creek. Without these, children were unable to walk to their closest school at Canterbury Public School. Finally, severe floods in the early 1960s caused the last of the market gardeners to leave. Today, after heavy rain the valley still floods and in recent years resulted in a dramatic rescue by helicopter from the roof a car at Bexley North Bridge.

Mangrove high tide  
Photo G. Gatenby

Cooks River dam  
Painting Clarke, courtesy of  
National Library of Australia

Sea Mullet  
Illustration G. Gatenby,  
courtesy NSW NPWS

Highcliff Road rain garden,  
Undercliffe 2010  
Photo SMCMA

