

Disappearing bushland

Early settlers recognised the value of the valley's timbers. In 1803 the Government boatbuilder reported that many of the trees had great potential as shipbuilding timber. His report led to a reassessment of the forest lands south of the Cooks River and in 1804 Governor King made the first land grants in the area.

Soon, the forests of the valley were disappearing. Timber for farms and mangroves for lime burning and soap making had a ready market in the growing colony.

Lime Burners

Commercial exploitation saw a rapid decline in the mangroves of Wolli Creek. Used to incinerate oysters and shells from middens to supply soda for the manufacture of soap and to make lime, mangroves helped meet the growing need for building materials.

As early as 1831 it was reported that 'The soap boilers still suffer considerable restriction from the insufficient supply of mangrove ashes'.

In 1850 a journalist wrote '*...aye, and the oyster growing mangroves temptingly inviting one to partake of their juicy dainties – where are they? Torn down by the ruthless hand of time, destroyed, and almost forgotten.*'

“ Money to be made by wood cutters, Farming men and Persons about Cooks River, Newtown Road and the Neighbourhood. Let every man ... clear the Arncliff Timber to his pocket. ”

Advertisement 1843



Cabbage Tree Creek

Cabbage Tree Palms (*Livistona australis*), were abundant in the valley, in fact it is said that Wolli Creek was known as '**Cabbage Tree Creek**'. Aborigines ate the growing tip of the palm and early settlers soon acquired a taste for this delicacy. This practice killed the palm. Soon no palms were left in the area.

To everyone's amazement, a few seedlings were found by bush regenerators working in Bardwell Valley in 2003 and a palm about two metres high had been found in a hidden part of Girrahween Park.

Cabbage Tree Palms were also used to make hats. Mrs Frances Carey, daughter of Isaac Parkes, one of the bare-knuckle boxers, recalls her mother's hat-making in an interview for the Hurstville Propellar, 1939.

'Mother used to make our school hats from the leaves of the cabbage-tree palms which grew wild in the Bardwell Creek gully. They were very popular in those days and worn by nearly everybody. At times my mother used to make extra ones for the gay young 'bloods' of the district. The best hats brought three or four guineas each.'

Bare Knuckle Boxers

The district around Wolli and Bardwell Creeks became known as the home of the **Cabbage Tree Hat Mob** so named because the hats were worn by the local 'lads'. On the northern side of the creek at Parkestown, now Earlwood, John Parkes' three sons trained as bare-knuckle boxers and kept crowds enthralled with fights held in the forest. Women were not permitted, although some women matched their men as this challenge from Joseph Hilton (known as Joe the Basketmaker of Cooks River Dam) shows ...

To Man, Woman, Dog and Cock

I hereby challenge to a fight any man in the country of 44 years of age, and 12st., and my wife shall fight any woman in the country bar none; and my dog shall fight any dog in the country 48lbs; and my cock shall fight any cock in the country of any weight; each battle shall be for £5 a-side.

Old Ironbark of Old Parkes Town

Born in 1871, Amy Bibo's poem recalls in 1932 the tree that she said '*was the only one of its kind left standing*'.

Old Tree, Old Tree,
'Tis thus I see thee now,
With wrinkled bark,
And scarce a leaf upon thy bough.
How oft among thy glossy leaves
Our childish hours we spent,
And swinging from thy drooping bough,
As near the ground it bent.

The old folks loved thee too, old Tree,
And in the sunset glow,
Beneath the shelter of thy limbs,
Told tales of long ago.
And brave and bold, Old Tree,
A century you've stood
The Sentinel of Old Parkes Town,
And now of New Earlwood.
Farewell, farewell, there's nothing left,
But memories, Old Tree;
And in thy heart of Ironbark,
Wilt thou remember me.

Extract from the publication
Parkestown to Earlwood
by Ron Hunt