

## **Paper presented at the National Garden History Conference 2005**

**By Barbara Dundas**

### **The Historic Town of Guildford – Between Sea and Scarp**

The historic town of Guildford is sited between sea and scarp on the Swan Coastal Plain. The town was developed as one of the first three towns settled in the Swan River Colony, (together with Perth and Fremantle) on the banks of the Swan River. Today the townsite of 160 hectares and approximately 700 dwellings is under the local government authority of the City of Swan.

Guildford is the only National Trust classified town in the Perth Metropolitan area and one of 6 such towns in W.A. It is listed on the Federal Register of the National Estate as:

*“a rare and comparatively intact nineteenth century town within a relatively undisturbed topographical setting ... the basic character and structure of the town remain as they have been since the period of railway development (1880’s-90’s) and are relatively unimpaired by encroachment from metropolitan Perth.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Town of Guildford was accorded greater recognition by the late Professor Gordon Stephenson who noted, *“In the planning context, Guildford as a whole should be regarded as one of the most important historic towns in Australia.”<sup>2</sup>*

Guildford is sited at the confluence of the Swan and Helena rivers, which almost completely surround the townsite. These riverine areas are composed of rich alluvial clay soil, deposited from the granite escarpment over millennia. Approximately half of the total land area of the town is subject to winter inundation and periodic floods. Heavy flooding in the past would turn the town into an island in the winter months, breaking the bridged entries. The last flood in 1983 was small in comparison with those of previous years.

These rivers have contributed to the uniqueness of this town of first settlement, in that they prevented extension beyond the original boundaries or town plan. The main streets were limited to the central spine of higher land<sup>3</sup>. The town contains a range of buildings from the 1840’s including one of the finest precincts of convict built buildings from the 1850’s/60’s. Guildford also has a range of historic plantings in streets, commonage and gardens often adjacent to built form of similar period. The town provides a unique opportunity to view changes in the landscape and built form, not in isolation but in overlapping historic layers, each determined by fashion, function, availability and necessity of that time.

The development of the town may be described as occurring in six distinct but overlapping layers:

- Pre-settlement
- First Settlement
- Convict Settlement
- Advent of the Railway
- Gold Boom
- Post World-War II
- Contemporary Guildford

### **1. Pre-settlement**

Today the flood fringes around Guildford afford glimpses of the area pre white settlement. The river banks were lined with reeds, *Maleleuca* (paperbark) and *Casuarina* (she-oak). *Eucalyptus Rudus* (flooded gum) stood tall in the floodplains and on the higher lands. Eastwards, the soil becomes patchy and in places sandy, supporting stands of redgums and blackboy (*xanthorea*). On sandy soils to the west, grew jarrah (*E marginata*)

The wetlands were rich in flora and fauna and became important hunting grounds for the aboriginal people who had inhabited the area for 40,000 years<sup>4</sup>. The Beelo, Mooro, Daren and Mountain tribal grounds resided intersected within the area now known as the Swan District, with land and water features forming tribal boundaries. The site of Guildford, the Helena River and its surrounds were known as Mandoon.<sup>5</sup> The Swan River had particular spiritual significance with the Waughal, or water serpent, which was said to sleep at the river bend.<sup>6</sup> The River is tidal up to this point and generally noted as estuarine.

The soils around Guildford are alluvial clays, washed from the granite escarpment of the Darling Range and deposited on the river food plains below.

### **2. First Settlement of the Swan River Colony 1829-1850**

The riverine lands that were important to the aboriginal people, were noted for their richness and fertility by Stirling and Fraser in their reconnaissance of the Western Coast in 1827. It was the perceived fertility of the land that determined the agricultural nature of the Swan River Colony two years later in 1829. The sea passage around the Cape of Good Hope to the new colony, also influenced settlement with collection of provisions of seed and cuttings and stock. The built form reflected

the English and Scottish background of the settlers,<sup>7</sup> and the town planning ideals of that time.

Stirling took his own grant of 4,000 acres in land adjacent to the Guildford Townsite. He named his estate 'Woodbridge' after his wife's birthplace and the town after his father-in-law's electorate in England.<sup>8</sup>

The Town Plan, drawn up in December 1829 by H.C. Sutherland was consistent with instructions from the Colonial Office. These required a proportion of land be reserved for public purpose and all boundary lines to be on cardinal points as far as the terrain would allow, to agree with a systematic rectangular principle.<sup>9</sup> Figure 1 shows this plan with its distinctive colonial distinctive features ( Central Church Square, a grid pattern street plan along the east-west spine of high land; substantial areas set aside for Government purpose )that are still evident in the street plan today.( Figure 2) Guildford was established as a market and port town for the planned hinterland agricultural areas. Wide road reserves foreshadowed the increasing land transport and the importance of the town as a commercial and regional centre.

Natural elements altered this early design over the first two decades of settlement .(See Figure 3 Guildford Townsite Plan 1842).Four commonages or King's Meadows were set aside in the wetlands, for public grazing. The area allocated for School use was reduced and a fifth commonage or Kings Meadow was created. The Market Place was relocated to higher ground. One resident, Captain Meares, moved his boundary posts into the public street reserve to increase his land area above flood level – reducing road reserves and leaving an indelible mark on the townscape today.

The public square was halved in size and part of the southern section was developed as a public watering place with a well; the northern section had one acre set aside for Church purposes. The Town Wharf was established at the Public Landing Place, north of the Square and adjacent to it developed a commercial area of stores and warehouses. Until 1869 and the construction of the Suez Canal, all ships traveled via the Cape of Good Hope, providing opportunities to restock with food, seed, cuttings and stock. Trees and vines still present in the town today have their origins in the Cape . The first vines were grown in Guildford and an Agricultural Society was formed to share ideas on horticultural species and land practice. Part of the early show grounds still exist as Fauntleroy Park today.

Guildford's population declined in the 1840's. Few properties were fenced at this time and flooded gum( *E rudis*) and Olive tree(*Olea europaea*) plantings were used to delineate boundaries. Remnant plantings form strong landscape elements today. Olive Street was named in the 1890's after a row of boundary trees planted on the eastern boundary of Guildford Town Lot 46.<sup>10</sup>

Remnant plantings designate the site of early dwellings and previous road levels in Helena and Ellen Streets and the track to the public wharf. There are a limited number of surviving buildings from this period. They include 21 Meadow Street (a colonial bungalow styled home built 1842 for Captain Meares), a small workers' cottages at 49 Helena Street and Welbourne's House in Market Street (circa 1840).

Local clay deposits enabled early construction to take on a permanent form. The rich, orange, red brick colour is a distinctive feature of the colonial buildings in the town today.

### **3. A Convict Settlement 1851-1880**

Transportation to WA resulted in a new phase of development in Guildford with the establishment of a convict depot. The new labour source and military building expertise saw roads, bridges and fine civic buildings constructed. Twenty one year old Lieutenant E. Du Cane, Royal Engineer, was appointed in charge of convicts and public works in the Eastern Region. His first project was his own home (1852), a fine brick and shingled residence with front door to the hills and kitchen, stables and toilet abutting Meadow Street. Etiquette of that time limited social opportunities for military officers and others of civic standing. Du Cane felt himself unable to mix with the colonial townspeople of Guildford.

*“There is nobody here I could associate with – though where I am now stopping there are some people with whom I have to feed.”<sup>11</sup>*

His home still stands in Meadow Street, a symbol of the disquiet of imposing a military and class structure on the colonial village. Under his supervision, the Swan River was bridged at the public landing place (1852) and rose cuttings planted on the embankments.<sup>12</sup> These Manettii roses still survive today. Du Cane supervised the construction of a Convict Depot,<sup>13</sup> Commissariat Quarters (1853) and Store (1854) and additions to the Gaol. Barker and Gulls Store and the Rose and Crown were also constructed in the 1850's..

Today, Guildford is said to contain one of the finest precincts of convict constructed buildings in WA, together with remnant plantings from this time.

In the 1860's, under the government architect Richard Roach Jewell, significant public buildings were constructed in Meadow Street including St Matthews Church (1860, later destroyed by a hurricane and rebuilt in 1871) the Court House (1866), the Mechanics' Hall (1865), and additions to the old gaol and police house (1850's-60's).

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Dwellings at this time (eg. King's Cottage at 11 Meadow Street) reflect English

Architectural styles with Georgian symmetry, however make innovative use of local materials, including *casuarina* shingles, jarrah verandahs, bricks and terra cotta floor tiles from local material. Gardens were generally utilitarian providing food or forage. Limited primary source documentation survives of the early small flower gardens. However arbors or timber framed walkways were garden popular features for all classes and a number of old arbors and plantings survive with grapes including the *Constantia* (South Africa) *Wortley Hall*, *Muscatelle*, *Crystal*.

The Municipal Council undertook a programme of tree planting from the early 1870's along the main roads of Meadow and James Streets with Cape Lilacs and Tree of Heaven.<sup>14</sup> Although ornamental plantings were introduced into the Square, the flooded gums dominated the early landscape of Guildford. (See Figure 4)

In 1871, Guildford was granted municipal status and established its own town crest with a bunch of grapes, an anchor and a sheaf of wheat symbolizing viticulture, commerce and agriculture, the *raison d'être* for the town.

#### **4. The Advent of the Railway 1881-1889**

During the 1880's the Town Council introduced incentives for residents to plant and care for trees on their street frontages. Remaining Cape Lilac trees in Meadow and Helena Street are thought to date from this period. Almond, Olive and white mulberry (*Morus alba*) were also considered acceptable street plantings, with white mulberry being preferred<sup>15</sup>.

The construction of the railway to Guildford marked a period of dramatic change. In 1881, the terminus of the Fremantle Line was constructed to a point opposite the site of the Guildford Hotel in James Street. The new line was to bisect the town and resulted in concerted community effort to prevent damage to Stirling Square. The railway was constructed down the centre of James Street and rerouted in 1890's to its present course. The railway directly affected the physical structure of the town by reducing the importance of river traffic. This led to decline in the importance of the warehousing and stores in Swan Street and Meadow Street. A new commercial centre developed opposite the railway station in James Street the late 1890's and early 1900's.

Pine trees planted along the Stirling Square/James Street boundary (undated plantings) were replaced c1897/8 after the railway was relocated through the southern section of the Square. These were subsequently removed in the 1930's as a fire hazard, igniting with cinders from the passing steam trains.

## 5. Gold Boom 1890-1930's

The Gold Boom of the 1890's brought a new wealth to the State in terms of capital, labour and skills. This period added a new layer of fashion and ideas to both the built and landscape form. Improved water supply and electric wires also contributed to planting changes.

The town bore sunk to 1207 feet in 1897 became unpotable within a couple of years and the water piped through the town under artesian pressure was used for laundry and garden purposes. The Mundaring Water Supply reached Guildford in 1906. This availability of water saw many garden move away from being purely utilitarian and functional to become decorative and aesthetic. Many significant plantings and landscape features survive from this period.

Guildford became a gentleman's town, a place of residence for prominent businessmen, senior government officers who could commute to the city by rail. These men built fine homes on the riverine allotments (eg. Crossland's *Riversleigh*, Coomb's *Strathalbyn*.) Retired pastoralists also favoured Guildford's semi rural setting (e.g. S. Humes' *Rosedale*, Smith's *Fairholme*). Many of these fine homes had formal gardens established with terracing, arbors and rose gardens. Chinese market gardeners worked the arable floodplains and stands of bamboo still mark their garden sites.

The establishment of the Railway Workshops in Midland together with the development potential of "the prettiest village in Western Australia" saw the central town lots subdivided and many small workers cottages constructed. The iron roofs, decorative chimneys, leadlight windows and turned verandah posts are features of many of these single story homes.

Sugar Gums (*E. cladycalyx*) were favoured for street planting and formed part of the Queen Victoria's Silver Jubilee Celebrations<sup>16</sup>. These trees have become a significant streetscape element in the town today and form focal elements in Swan, Market James Streets and the west end of Terrace Road .

The last significant street tree planting of sugar gums occurred in 1904 in Hill Street,<sup>17</sup> although older residents have described infill planting in Swan Street, east of the old town centre.

In this period the Town Council conducted a coordinated programme of tree planting through the town, including; Moreton Bay Figs (*Ficus macrophylla*), Camphor Laurel (*Cinnamomum camphora*), Californian pepper (*Schinus molle*) and also recommended *Pinus insignis* 18. In Victoria Street, American Ash and Oak trees were planted

alternately (these were removed in the 1990's as their natural form had been crippled through regular pollarding necessitated by overhead power lines.)<sup>18</sup>

*Pittosporum* were first planted in Waylen, Bertie and Stirling Streets in the early 1900's. There is no record of when the Moreton Bay Figs were first planted in Meadow Street, however they were described by residents as being large trees in 1912. Planted outside the government buildings they became a noted, although ageing precinct that was removed in the 1990's.

American Ash (*Fraxinus americana*) were planted in Bank Street in 1929. Older trees still stand in Meadow street and are thought to be nineteenth century plantings. These trees grew better in the clay soils than elsewhere in the sandy coastal plain and achieved remarkable size, however, they have not responded well to root interference (cabling and service development) or ground compaction of car parking. Today their condition is in decline.

Peppermint trees (*Agonis flexuosa*) were planted on the Recreational Grounds in 1929 and at this time may also have reinforced earlier plantings in Helena Street. Today this street has a noted landscape with fine stands of mature *Casuarina* and *Agonis* along both road reserves.

An avenue of Plane trees (*Platanus x acerifolia*) was planted in Terrace Road adjacent to the new Chapel of St. Mary and St George and other buildings of Guildford Grammar School in 1930. These trees form a fine precinct on the Eastern entry to the town.

Guildford with its rich soils became noted for its roses and rose nurseries (Harper, Bennie, Rhodes). Stirling Square was redeveloped with rose gardens, wisteria walks, reflection pond, fountain and sundial. Many gardens were planted with roses and shrubs that were fashionable in the 1930's and 1940's. Helena King, a prominent landscape architect at this time, developed her garden in Helena Street with native and exotic species.

In this time frame Guildford enjoyed stability in built and landscape form. A limited number of War Service homes were constructed after WW1 on the old Agricultural Grounds and locally produced kit timber homes (by Douglas Jones) were erected on saw dust filled clay pits.

## **6. Post World War II 1940's-1960's**

Guildford declined in importance as a residential and commercial centre in this period. It was no longer referred to as fashionable address. Sited directly under the flight path of the expanding Perth Airport and downwind of the State Abattoirs and Saleyards.; it was perceived by many to lack the amenity of other suburbs .

Post war immigrants moved into the town and the Swan Valley; they valued the arable land and large blocks .A few homes were demolished, and many the large turn of century residences were turned into Mental Health Hostels and C Class Hospitals .However, the town largely escaped the redevelopment pressures of other suburbs in the 1960's .

There were small changes to the landscape of the town. Jacaranda trees were planted in Guildford for the first time in the 1940's outside the recently constructed Art Deco Town Hall, refurbished Council Offices and adjacent to a mobile servery (Alfred's Kitchen). These trees have not thrived in the heavy clay soils.

The pine trees and some sugar gums, previously planted alongside the railway in James Street in the centre of the town were removed in the 1950's

Coral gums (*Erythrina indica*) were planted in east end of Swan Street and also replaced plantings of *Brachychiton* in Stirling Street.

## **7 Contemporary Guildford 1970-2005**

Today Guildford still maintains a high degree of integrity of its nineteenth and early twentieth century town plan, built form and landscape. In the past thirty five years Guildford has experienced new threats to its historic environment.

### ***Development Pressure***

Located just 12 minute from the city by express train, Guildford is facing inevitable pressure to redevelop. The resulting urban growth has seen blocks being acquired for infill development with the loss of both old homes and mature plantings on site and all too frequently on mature trees on neighbouring blocks.

In a 10 year period between 1981 and 1991, 61 residential units were constructed. This comprised 83% of all dwellings erected within the period, imposing a new density, scale and design of building that was atypical of the historic town. Unit development adversely impacted on the landscape by clearing all vegetation and boundary trees and also affecting trees on adjacent properties. The National Trust

supported the citizens of Guildford and encouraged the Shire of Swan to develop a Conservation Policy and Building Guidelines in 1991. Although this was initially successful in protecting the town, today staff turnover limits corporate memory and understanding of many of the objectives. The 15 policies planned in 1991 relating to the floodplains, landscape, signage, trees etc have never been developed.

An amendment to the Town Planning Scheme passed in 1992 prevented battle-axing and subdivision of blocks less than half acre. This policy is to come under review soon.

### ***Loss of Representation***

Guildford Town Council amalgamated with Swan Roads Board in 1960 and (under duress) with the Midland Council in the 1970's. The loss of representation (Guildford has one out of 13 councillors) is believed by many residents to have affected planning, maintenance and community service. Turn over of council staff and councillors results in a limited corporate memory of the many studies, plans and policies of the town.

### ***Traffic***

#### **Roads**

Guildford is divided by major regional roads, moving vehicles north-south and east-west. The roads, once the life blood of Guildford, are strangling the town. Massive housing development to the North in the Swan Valley will further increase traffic, segregate the town and damage amenity. Tourism initiatives compound the traffic congestion. The community has battled to keep its bridges single-lane each way. These historical features, form both entry statements and calm traffic. Whilst road widening works have seen trees removed in James and East Streets<sup>19</sup>. Recent community concerns have resulted in programmes to narrow roads (James Street west) and discourage through traffic.

#### **Aircraft**

The amenity of the town is affected by aircraft noise. The town lies directly under the flight path of the main runway of Perth Airport that carries 29% of all aircraft movements. Approximately 30% of the town is affected by aircraft noise. Under Australian Standards 2021 these areas will become unsuitable for residential use. It will become progressively harder for residents to justify expending funds on restoration as they lose amenity and outdoor living is adversely affected.

### ***Tree Maintenance vs Replacement***

There appears to be limited understanding of the importance of the historic relationship between built form and environment in the planning context. No guidelines exist for planting themes in precincts or streets. The result is a hotch potch

of planting on street reserves reflecting preferences of private individuals, and Shire plantings that are frequently inconsistent with existing planting themes.

State and Local Government decision-making is based around cost-effectiveness. In 1999 the community was advised that all mature sugar gum plantings in James Street were to be removed and replaced with jacarandas because of maintenance costs. A community protest involving residents from all over the metropolitan area, over several weeks, resulted in council agreement to retain and maintain these fine trees. Jacarandas have already been planted in the central median strip of James Street adjacent to the Sugar Gums.

The avenue of Moreton Bay Figs outside the Government buildings in Meadow St was removed early one morning – with military precision. No replanting has occurred.

Public liability is now a major issue and has resulted in the Ministry of Planning removing ‘dangerous trees’ on the flood plain in areas designated as public open space. Council officers have also expressed concern at replanting *E. rudis* near road reserves.

There are no funds or support for residents with ageing trees (eg. *E. rudis* ) on their properties. The cost of maintenance is often prohibitive resulting in their removal maintenance is often prohibitive and mature vegetation is removed as a cheaper option to maintenance.

### ***The Tyranny of Small Decisions***

Guildford’s built environment is recognized as containing predominantly nineteenth and early twentieth century form. Building materials and scale of building as outlined in the Conservation Plan and Guidelines are frequently over-ruled by Council. Planning decisions based on individual developments have led to a ‘Tyranny’ of small decisions, a process described by Taylor as a major threat to the erosion of the historic fabric of the town.

Current plans by one large property owner to fill and reshape approximately 20% of the floodplain – the unique topography – will set a dangerous precedent for future development and may undermine the historic integrity of the town.

### ***Fads and Fashion***

The landscape and built form are dynamic and have always been subject to changes in fashion, technology and availability of resources. Guildford with its physical isolation and relative stability of residents has at times been called both a ‘backward’ town and ‘charming village’ that has valued and clung to its traditions. In the 1970’s and 80’s

most residents chose Guildford as a place of residence because of its unique historic and rural lifestyle.

The fights to retain the heritage of the area had resulted in the town, with its Grammar school, becoming a ‘fashionable’ address in the 1990’s. Many new residents wish to transpose their ideas of contemporary living without knowledge of Guildford’s existing built and landscape form. Tuscan gardens, limestone walls and tilt up garage doors are changing the face of the town. Many old plantings are being removed in favour of the lavender and standard iceberg roses. Mature trees are being removed for extensions and swimming pools. Street trees are being replaced without regard to historic planting themes.

The fragile historic environment of Guildford is at a knife edge – historic interpretation with brick entry statements, flagpoles and loud signage appears to have taken precedence over maintenance of the interwoven layers of historic environment. Whilst limited heritage incentives exist for built form, but there are none for private landscape and plantings. Funds are being put into interpretation and not into policies, education and identification of historic sites and landscape form.

## **Future**

The issues of Development, Traffic, Maintenance vs Replacement and Fashion will continue to affect Guildford into the future. Historic Guildford is at a knife edge of change. There is a need for a statutory process to acknowledge the town as an historic entity of national significance and prevent erosion of its historic character by the Tyranny of Small Decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Heritage Commission “Guildford Historic Town” Place Report 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Stephenson, G, correspondence to Dundas, B. 19.05.1995.

<sup>3</sup> Guildford Study Group “Guildford – a study of its unique character” Unpub. Report for Shire of Swan 1981.

<sup>4</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Perth Gazette 20.04.1833, p60 a,b.

<sup>6</sup> Guildford Study Group, *ibid*, Appendix pp iii-v.

<sup>7</sup> Burke, M. “On the Swan – a History of the Swan District of W.A.” UWA Press, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p34.

<sup>9</sup> H.C Sutherland “Site of Guildford”, Plan 17, Battye Library, WA 5235, CONS 3565.

<sup>10</sup> Guildford Study Group, *ibid*, p

<sup>11</sup> Correspondence Du Cane E to his mother 18.04.1852, Battye Library ACC 909A.

<sup>12</sup> Du Cane, *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> Guildford Study Group, *ibid*, p

<sup>14</sup> Guildford Municipal Council Minutes 6/12/1877, Battye Library ACC 1110A.

<sup>15</sup> Guildford Municipal Council Minutes 6/4/1882.

<sup>16</sup> Swan, Helena Vale and Guildford Adventurer, 8.8.1897, p2.

<sup>17</sup> Richards, “Trees in Meadow Street Guildford WA” Heritage Report prepared for the Shire of Swan 1993.

<sup>18</sup> Guildford Municipal Council Annual Half Yearly Rate Payer Meeting 1896.

<sup>19</sup>