

HMAS Lonsdale Site

The site of the former HMAS Lonsdale Naval Depot in Beach Street, Port Melbourne was once a controversial waterway known as the Sandridge lagoon. Throughout the nineteenth century local residents, in conjunction with the Sandridge Town Council, fought for the conversion of the lagoon into a dock. Their aim was to promote maritime activities in the township in the hope of enriching the settlement. The lagoon, however, was not to have a maritime future, instead it underwent a process of gradual filling in throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By 1929 the process was complete and the lagoon was completely filled. A portion of the reclaimed land was acquired by the Department of Defence during the Second World War to establish the HMAS Lonsdale shore establishment. HMAS Lonsdale played an important role in the training of naval recruits during the Second World War and later assumed additional responsibilities. HMAS Lonsdale was eventually closed down in 1992.

Prior to colonisation, a large part of Victoria was occupied by the Kulin Nation. The Kulin Nation was a large ‘confederacy of peoples’¹ which included the traditional owners of the area we know today as the City of Port Phillip, the Bunurong or Boonerwung group. Present day Port Melbourne was included in the Bunurong’s territory and it is likely that the saltwater lagoon, abundant in marine and bird life, was an important place of social activity for the group.

At the time of settlement the lagoon stretched back from the Bay a little over a kilometre and ran between the East and West Esplanades, with bridges providing safe passage across. During high tide it was twenty seven acres in size and plunged to a depth of about ten feet between the Rouse and Graham Street bridges. During the early years of the Sandridge² township the lagoon was as large as the settled area itself and the local residents logically concluded that it should be developed for use in some way. As early as 1854 debate commenced regarding the future of the lagoon, but its fate would not be finally decided until the Port Melbourne Lagoon Act was passed in 1889.

¹ Meyer Eidelson, *Walks in Port Phillip: A Guide to the Cultural Landscapes of a City* (Melbourne: City of Port Phillip, 2001). 28.

² The Port Melbourne township was known as ‘Sandridge’ until 1884.

In 1854 a public meeting was held in Sandridge to promote the opening up of the mouth of the lagoon to the sea and the development of a dock. The residents hoped in doing so, they would enrich the prospects of the settlement. By 1868, however, the north end of the lagoon had been significantly polluted by effluent from Emerald Hill³ which drained into the waterway. The putrid smell which emanated from the lagoon was a source of great discomfort and concern for many local residents, and continued as such throughout the course of the following sixty years. This discomfort felt by local residents and their subsequent concerns regarding matters of health, gave added impetus to the movement promoting the development of the lagoon into a dock.

Funding for the development of the lagoon, however, proved difficult to find. The Sandridge Town Council was reliant on the state Government and the Public Works Department to finance development projects, but it was told time and time again that no funds were available. Various alternatives to the dock proposal were put forward, including drainage to the sea. The suggestion of filling in the lagoon, however, received the most support from the Government, the Works Department and the Melbourne Harbour Trust which gained control of the lagoon upon its formation in 1877. While the Sandridge Town Council and local residents acknowledged the need to fill in the very northern end of the lagoon between Ingles and Spring Streets, as it was more often a pool of mud than a waterway, they were unconvinced about the need to fill it in completely to Beach Street. The Council believed that the Government (along with the other regulatory bodies) was deliberately denying Port Melbourne the opportunity to realise its maritime power due to a fear of competition, and consequently opposed the proposal to completely fill in the lagoon for some time. The Sandridge Town Council had genuine cause for concern because by the mid 1870s the north end of the lagoon was well under way to being filled in and no dock was under construction.

In many respects the Sandridge Town Council found it difficult to act in regard to the lagoon issue and although dredging would have helped to improve the putrid condition of the waterway, it was a process that only ever helped in the short term. Some progress was made by the Council in 1888 when it moved to reserve part of the reclaimed land fronting Liardet Street for a park; this ornamental reserve became Edwards Park. When the Government passed the Port Melbourne Lagoon Act in 1889, however, it put an end

³ 'Emerald Hill' was the original name for South Melbourne.

to the indecision over the future of the lagoon by definitively settling its fate. The Act provided five thousand pounds for filling in the waterway, which it was agreed would be done to Rouse Street. In 1897, after it became apparent that much of the reclaimed land would be unsuitable for sale, two acres were set aside for a further ornamental reserve; which would eventually be known as 'Lagoon Reserve'. This parkland was later added to when much of the reclaimed land proved unsuitable for housing. In June 1928, the Lady Forster Free Kindergarten was officially opened on part of the lagoon reserve and later the Council Infant Welfare Centre was established next to the Kindergarten.

Concerns over the unsanitary state of what remained of the lagoon continued well into the twentieth century. While many residents seem to have accepted the lagoon's fate as set out in the 1889 Lagoon Act, fishermen and the Port Melbourne Yacht Club continually objected to the plan to completely fill in the waterway. For years a small fishing fleet had made use of the lagoon and was reluctant to give up this favoured haunt. Ultimately, the fishermen and yachtsmen lost the battle and by 1929, after years of debate over its future, the lagoon was completely filled in.

In 1942 the naval depot HMAS Lonsdale, was established on the reclaimed land fronting Beach Street. The name of the naval depot was considered appropriate as the Victorian Government had in commission from 1882 until 1911 a second class torpedo boat named 'Lonsdale', and it is probable that this boat used the torpedo depot which had been established along the beachfront at Port Melbourne sometime in the 1880s.

While Port Melbourne has had a continual naval presence since settlement, the demands of the Second World War put pressure on Australian naval resources unlike ever before. Thus the HMAS Lonsdale shore establishment was constructed in order to cope with the increased demand for recruits and services. The new building was officially occupied on 3 May 1942 and Lieutenant Commander R.S. Veale became the first Reserve officer to command the HMAS Lonsdale Naval Depot. Throughout the course of the Second World War HMAS Lonsdale was used mainly as a transit centre for the receipt and dispatch of men.

After 1950 the role of HMAS Lonsdale expanded to include various responsibilities including training. In 1953 a three storey accommodation block was erected on the north side of Rouse Street and in 1971 the Depot was further expanded when new naval shore

patrol, stores and band practice buildings were established. At the same time the old 'Nissen' huts that had been erected during the Second World War were replaced with a new instruction block.

Following the closure of HMAS Lonsdale in 1992 the Port Phillip Council strongly opposed what they and many local residents considered inappropriate development on the site. Concerns centred around the effects a high-rise building might have upon the character of the area. The state Government, however, agreed to a reduction in height and the development went ahead. Today, an eighteen storey apartment block stands on the site of the former naval depot, providing apartments overlooking the Bay for Port Melbourne's latest residents.

Further Reading

Eidelson, Meyer. *Walks in Port Phillip: A Guide to the Cultural Landscapes of a City.*

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U'Ren, Nancy, and Noel Turnbull. *A History of Port Melbourne.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1983.

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