

Belair National Park State Heritage Area

Belair National Park was declared a State Heritage Area on 19 September 1985.

Many individual places contribute to the heritage significance of Belair National Park. Besides constructions such as ovals, picnic grounds, sheds and an arbour, noteworthy historic structures include the State heritage-listed Old Government House (1860), as well as the Commissioner's House (1852), the Ranger's Residence (1895) and the Karka (1911) and Main Oval (1900) Pavilions. Other historic buildings, including Blue Cottage (c1865), Western Lodge (1893), Belair Lodge (1893) and Melville House (1901) are now leased as private residences.

Many short and longer walking trails have been established and are well-signposted within the Park. Notably the internationally acclaimed Yurrebilla Trail, which winds through 54 kilometres of the Adelaide Hills, starts (or finishes - depending on your direction of travel!) in the Belair National Park.

In the decade between 1871 and 1881, the population of Adelaide almost doubled, placing a heavy demand on existing areas used for public outings and sport. With this increased need for venues reasonably close to the city, came a heightened awareness that the attractive Adelaide Hills areas were disappearing into private ownership.

One example of this public concern for the environment was the formation, in October 1883, of a section of the Royal Society known as the Field Naturalists. The following extract, from a talk given by member Arthur F. Robin, is indicative of the (prophetic) sentiments expressed by this group and others:

"National Parks will be useful, not only as preservers for indigenous plants and animals, but also as recreation grounds for the people. It is well to consider how comparatively few and small are the areas of this description which will be permanently available for the residents of the Adelaide Plains ... there must come a time when these plains will be thickly populated from hills to sea, and then, if not now, the need for more breathing space will be recognised. The Mount Lofty Range is gradually passing more and more into private hands, and before many years have elapsed it will be difficult to find a place where one may enjoy the beauties of nature without fear of trespassing. The same results must follow sooner or later in all settled districts of the province. Hence there arises a necessity for large reserves which shall be vested in trustees in perpetuity." (*cited in Harris, C. National Parks and Reserves of South Australia MA Thesis, Adelaide, 1974*)

At the same time, high unemployment levels by the early 1880s were an ominous sign of the coming Depression. One government strategy to ease unemployment problems was the sub-division, into working men's blocks, of an area laid aside by Governor Gawler in 1840 as a Government Farm.

Part of the history of this Farm concerns its use for agisting government horses, including those in the Gold Escort Routes during 1852-3. It was also the site for the Governor's summer residence, built in 1859 and used in a limited capacity until the building of Marble Hill in 1880.

Conflict, over the future use of Government Farm, developed between the politicians and members of the public who had increasing expectations for the provision of parks. The proposal drew particular opposition from two citizens, James Page of Mitcham and Walter Gooch of Belair, whose efforts helped to prevent the sub-division scheme from being carried out. One supporting argument was that the Adelaide to Nairne railway, which opened in 1883 and ran through the proposed park, would enable large numbers of people to visit the area.

Although a Bill to prohibit the sale of the Farm was originally defeated in the Legislative Council, Parliament later reversed its decision, following public pressure, and a law was subsequently passed to prohibit the sale of the Farm without Parliamentary sanction.

Between October 1888 and December 1890 the Government was further pressured to declare the area a National Park. A total of three deputations, comprised largely of learned societies and bodies such as the Trades and Labour Council and The United Friendly Societies, met with representatives of the Government. Arthur Robin also prepared a Private Member's Bill seeking to vest the whole of Government Farm in trust as a National Park.



Unfortunately the Bill was thrown out by the President of the Legislative Council. However, when the Premier met with the third deputation at the end of 1890, he indicated that a large portion of the Government Farm could be set aside as a public park, with a small section reserved for working men's blocks. The National Park Act, assented to by the Governor on 19 December 1891, vested in perpetuity 796 hectares of the Farm to a Board of 12 Commissioners.

The Board was responsible for developing the Park and determining its future use. Until the 1920s the area was cleared of scrub and timber, wattle bark was sold and stock was agisted, in order to make the Park financially viable. Plantings of exotic tree species were carried out, culminating in the planting of Japanese cherries in Sparkes Gully in 1922, in memory of allied victory in World War One. Facilities such as ovals, tennis courts, pavilions, kiosks and arbours were gradually established. Revenue from the hire of these facilities grew to exceed the income from timber felling and bark stripping. The eastern section of the Park was not developed and has been retained in a relatively natural state.

The social use of the Park was determined by changes in affluence and transportation. A characteristic of the first two or three decades was the large groups of picnickers who expected to eat in a shelter, thus leading to the provision of large pavilions near the Main Oval and at Long Gully. Following the rise of private car ownership after World War Two, an emphasis on outdoor picnics came from an increasing number of family groups who travelled in private cars. Smaller groups gradually equalled and then outnumbered the large firm or church picnics.

HISTORY TRIVIA

For most of its history Belair National Park has been known simply as 'National Park'.

The Main Oval was prepared in 1894, and two wells sunk nearby to provide drinking water.

The first two tennis courts, prepared and dressed with tar, opened near the Main Oval in 1896.

The first kiosk was built in 1896, with a second one at Long Gully in 1904 and extended in 1909.

The first pavilion, seating 200 people, was built adjacent to the Main Oval in 1900. A second pavilion at Long Gully was built in 1904, but demolished in 1928 and replaced by one seating 550 people.

In 1911 Commissioner Gooch prohibited all picnics and bands in the Park on Sundays.

In 1936 Boy Scouts held their Jamboree in the Park.

Sheep grazed in the Park between 1936-46.

During World War Two the Park was used for military camps, which occupied Main, Gums and Tea-Tree Ovals plus all nearby pavilions, arbours and tennis courts.

Para Wirra Recreation Park was acquired by the State to partly relieve the pressure of overcrowding and over-use of facilities at Belair.

Between 1972-1991 Belair National Park was known as Belair Recreation Park.



Further Information

For further information please contact the State Heritage Unit

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