

Robinson Park, Fairfield 4103 – an evolving landscape

Denis Peel and Wendie Robinson Hirsch*

Food source to recreation reserve

Robinson Park Fairfield, bounded by Fairfield Road and Brougham, Sydney and Ashby streets is listed as park number 23, by Brisbane City Council (BCC). In earlier times it was known as “Fairfield Swamp”. For thousands of years Fairfield Swamp would have held much wildlife, and been an important food source for the Yerongpan clan who were using nearby campsites in this part of the riverside environment.¹ In 1823 a Yerongpan woman sitting weaving a dilly beside this wetland could hardly have foreseen the changes that would occur over the next 200 years.



Robinson Park 2023 (Photo: Denis Peel)



Fairfield 1884 map

When the first land sales in this area were held in 1853 John Williams purchased an 80 acre block centred around the Fairfield Swamp. Various owners over the next 81 years used the area around the wetland for farming, growing crops, and dairying. The South Coast Railway line was constructed beside Fairfield Road in 1884 and moved to the present location after the 1893 flood had covered the area for depths of up to fifteen feet over the rail line.

The Fairfield and District Progress Association wrote to Council in 1931, requesting the acquisition of property in Fairfield Swamp for purposes of a children’s playground and general sports area. This request was rejected, and it was not until 1934 that this question was raised in Council again.² The Finance and Health Committee of the Council had been asked to report on the desirability of resuming Fairfield Swamp for Municipal purposes. It was noted that it was a swampy mosquito breeding area and if acquired for public use, would be improved by reclaiming, draining, and filling. The committee favoured the resumption as the land was considered unfit for any other purpose in its present condition.

* Denis Peel is a Fairfield resident who enjoys daily walks through Robinson Park.

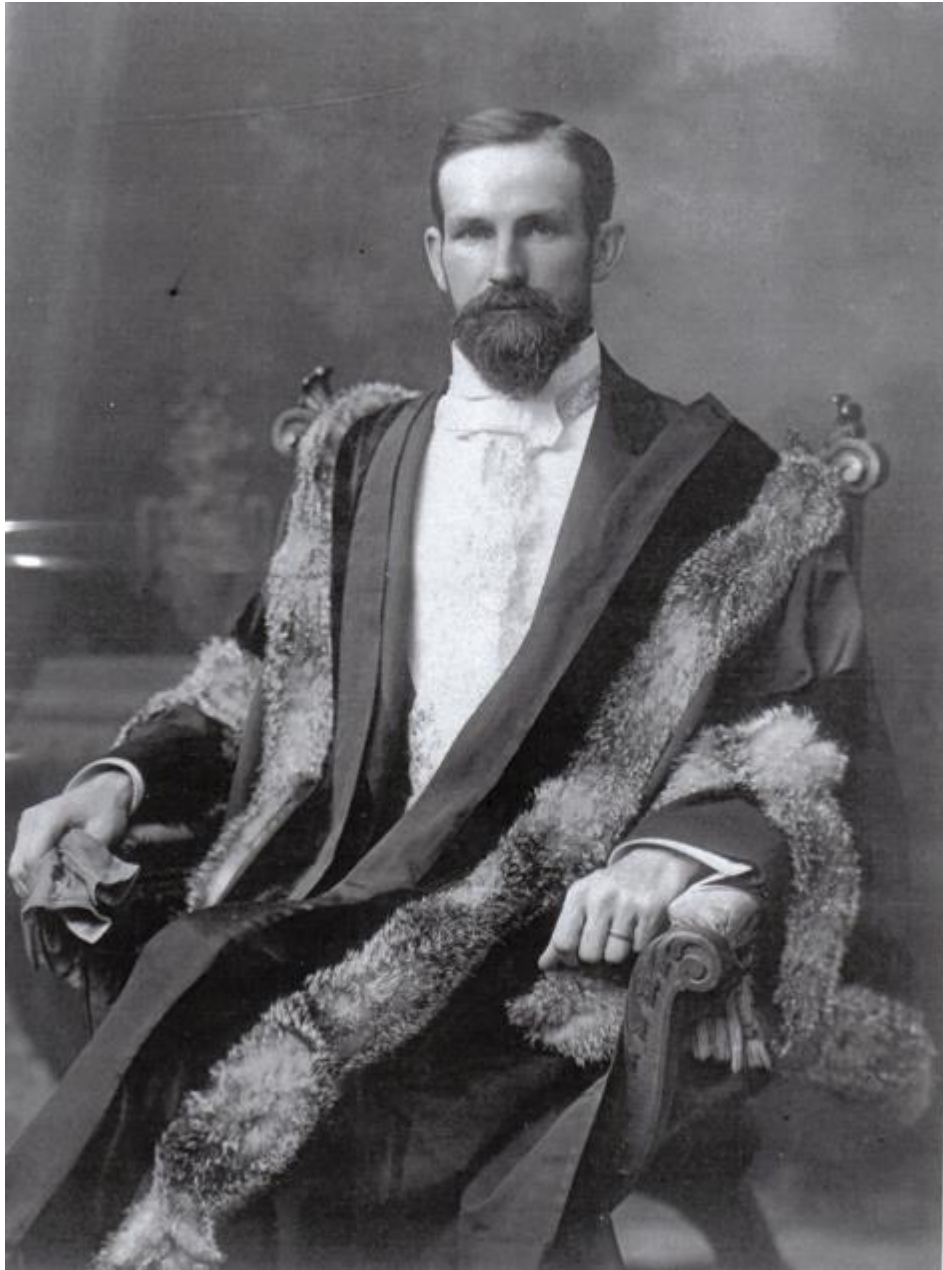
Wendie Robinson Hirsch is a great niece of James Nicol Robinson and has written a number of family history books including *The Robinson Boys and their Highfield*, *Nicol and Hollinworth Families* published 2009 which is a source for this article.

There was a large parcel of land in private hands next to the swamp, but resumption of this was not necessary as Council had on 22 November 1934, bought, for 100 pounds, 4 acres 1 rood 26 perches of land which had been put up for sale because, in these depression times, the owners were in arrears with their rates. This left another piece of land of 2 acres 19 perches which would be needed to square off the field to make it suitable for sports. Fortunately, this parcel was able to be bought by Council for 50 pounds. Over a lengthy period to the end of the 1940's the Council did reclamation work, draining and filling, and top-dressing of the site.³ Paid work was hard to find in the depression era, so this would have been a welcome chance for some of the many unemployed to earn a small wage as "Day Labour".



Robinson Park 1949 (Photo: BCC collection)

In 1946, in a list of BCC Parks, park number 23 is referred to as Fairfield Sports Ground, but, by 1949, the Council decided to name the park and called it Robinson Park after James Nicol Robinson (JNR) who had been an Alderman from 1898 to 1900 and was elected Mayor in 1900.⁴ At the time the park was named, JNR was the oldest practising and longest serving solicitor in Brisbane. A large number of parks were named after ex Mayors at this time, but matching Robinson's name to this park seems to have been a random event as JNR had no particular connection to this area.



James Nicol Robinson Mayor of Brisbane 1900 (Robinson family collection)

James Nicol Robinson

James Nicol Robinson was the sixth child of a free settler, Blakiston Robinson, who had arrived in Melbourne on the Black Ball Line clipper, *Lightning*, and of his wife, Isabella Jaffray Nicol whom he had met on that voyage in 1854 and married two weeks after their arrival in Melbourne. JNR was educated at the Brisbane Normal School and entered Brisbane Grammar School in 1882 on a State Scholarship passing Sydney Junior Exam with 7 subjects and leaving school in 1884. He became an articled clerk in 1885 in Maryborough with Morton and Power Solicitors and was admitted as a solicitor in 1890 and established his own legal practice in Brisbane in that year at the age of 22.⁵

JNR bought a dairy farm in Maleny, mainly to get two of his sons involved. The whole Robinson family lived in Maleny for several years in the 1920s. He developed a branch of his legal firm in Maleny and commuted regularly to and from Brisbane. His involvement in

dairying extended to his being President of the Dairy Cattle Society. He was the proud winner of prizes for his cattle at the Royal National Show at Brisbane Exhibition Ground.⁶



Newhills Maleny (Robinson family collection)



James Nicol Robinson's prize winning cow RNA Show (Robinson family collection)

Alderman and Mayor

JNR ran as a candidate for the North Ward of the Brisbane Municipal Council elections in 1898.⁷ The Brisbane Municipal Council area at that time was a small area on the north bank of the Brisbane River and included the city and a few suburbs including Spring Hill where JNR lived, Kangaroo Point was the only ward on the southside. He believed he was more “in touch

with local requirements” than his opponent the sitting Alderman Hipwood who had “by reason of his residence at Coorparoo ... lost his old interest in us.”⁸



Family home of JNR's parents, Gregory Terrace c1870. His mother Isabella and two sons (Robinson family collection)

In his open letter to the *The Worker*, he continued “If elected my chief aim will be to rectify the present neglected state of our streets”. He also stood to advocate for the building of “a Free Library and Public Hall where we can readily meet to discuss municipal questions.” He stated Health was his first consideration and that he wanted Council to stop using contractors for sanitary and rubbish collection and to do the work themselves.

He called for sewerage and water supply decisions to be made on the principle of “the best expert information obtainable ... as we have seen too much lately of hasty experiments”.⁹

JNR at 28 years of age became the first lawyer to be elected to Brisbane Municipal Council with a substantial winning majority of 328.¹⁰

As part of the “new blood” on Council he made enough of an impression to have a full-page feature in the *Queenslander*, “*People We Know*” section.¹¹

In his first few months as an Alderman, he was “generally approved as being an acquisition to Council” though he didn’t achieve all of his ambitions as the article shows:

“No one who hasn’t leisure or an axe to grind would ever think of vegetating in Brisbane Council. And no-one can accuse J Nicol of having any axes - save one. Can’t stand the scavenging-carts passing along Gregory Terrace with their fetid freight. J Nicol lives there. Would rather they went past someone else’s door; which is distinctly human nature! At the

same time, he desires to benefit lots of others – Gregory Terrace is a populous place. Like all sensible men, can't see the force of converting Victoria Park into a city rubbish-bin ... J Nicol made a big effort to alter things; wanted council to do its own scavenging work. Vote in council, however, went unaccountably wrong: wasn't J Nicol's fault."



Robinson land on corner of Gregory Terrace and Arthur now Torrington Street



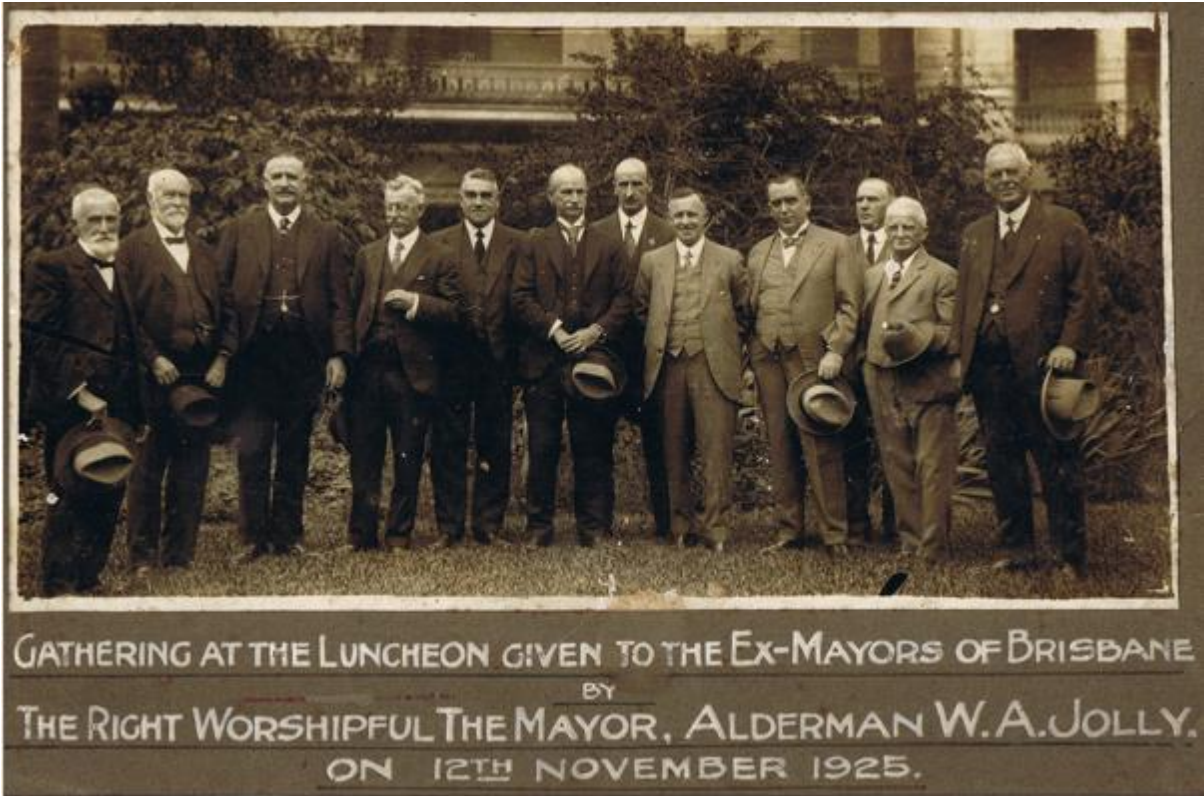
Queenslander 9 April 1898 p5

Mayors of Brisbane Municipal Council were elected by the sitting Aldermen (no women had ever been elected to Council up to this time). Electing the mayor wasn't always an harmonious process. In 1899 after five of the ten councillors had been proposed, one after another as Mayor, and all defeated, JNR was proposed but declined to accept nomination on the basis of needing another years' experience and also for business reasons.¹²

The 1900 mayoral election was, by contrast, smooth – JNR was proposed and unanimously elected.¹³

1900 was to prove a difficult year with an outbreak of bubonic plague arriving in Brisbane. 136 cases and 57 deaths were recorded in the year.¹⁴

At the closing Council meeting of the year JNR announced his resignation as he was "leaving the ward he represented" and "his duties as alderman interfered with his private business matters". Aldermen Thorne, Mc Nab and Stewart congratulated JNR on "the way he discharged his duties" and "the manner in which he had gone through a difficult time in office".¹⁵



James Nicol Robinson sixth from left (Robinson family collection)



Mayor Sally Anne Atkinson presenting portrait of Mayor JNR to Alec Kidd of Nicol Robinson and Kidd

Robinson Park after 1949

In 1953 the YMCA Soccer Football Club applied for a 10-year lease of the grounds.¹⁶ They were required to make improvements including building and maintaining dressing rooms, toilets and fences and pay all costs for water, power, insurance of buildings, as well as make the area available for cricket in summer. They took another 5-year lease from 1959 again with a lot of conditions.¹⁷

In the mid-1950s, a square dancing group who normally danced in the Yeronga RSL Hall, had a square dancing evening in Robinson Park, dancing to music supplied by a square dance caller who ran the event from the back of a truck. It was a family affair so their children attended with them and had fun racing around in the dark together.¹⁸



Square dance event in Robinson Park mid 1950's Wendie Robinson on right (Robinson family collection)

In 1974 Robinson Park, like most of Fairfield, was submerged by the Australia Day flood. A petition in 1975 from local residents requested the demolition of the toilets and sheds. They were probably in very poor condition after the flood and a police report concluded that “an undesirable element has been using the toilet block as a meeting place”.¹⁹

In 1980, Queensland Soccer Federation, on behalf of Rovers Soccer Club, applied for a 5-year lease and were to build amenities on the western side of the grounds and also fences, to minimum value of \$10,000.²⁰ They were to pay rent of 500 dollars per annum in advance and pay costs for water, power and insurance, and make the fields available for summer sport and for school use at agreed times. They were alerted to the possibility of resumption of some land for widening of Fairfield Road. There is photographic evidence that play equipment, swings, slides and see-saws, were installed on the grounds in 1986 and that equipment was subsequently replaced as deterioration and growing understanding of safety concerns made changes necessary for childrens playgrounds.

When Fairfield Road was widened in the 1980s the Council did indeed resume a corner of the park so it was then unsuitable as an official sports field and was, in due course planted with trees and landscaped. It continued as an unofficial sports field for more than another decade with a large group playing soccer every Sunday afternoon.



Robinson Park 2011 flood (Photo: John Dooly State Library of Qld collection)

The park was inundated again in the floods of 2011 and 2022 but suffered far more damage during the “super-cell storm” of 27 November 2014.²¹ This “mini-cyclone” uprooted many of the mature fig trees the roots of which simply tore out of the layer of Tennyson Powerhouse ash hidden beneath the grass surface of the park. BCC looked at the problem and decided to replant and anchor future trees by building conical mounds centred on rocks held in gabion baskets. The trees continue to grow and prosper at the time of writing.



Roots of fallen tree 30 Nov 2014 showing Tennyson Powerhouse ashes (Photo: Pauline Peel)



Replacement fig trees 2017 (Photo: Denis Peel)



Replacement fig trees June 2023 (Photo: Denis Peel)

The park today is used daily as a children’s playground, weekly as a venue for a Tai Chi class run by BCC, and occasionally for events such as Xmas Carol Concerts.



Tai chi class 2011 (Photo: Susan Chisholm)



Christmas Carols Concert 2014 (unknown photographer)

In 2016 members of the Robinson family were present for the installation of the sign in honour of James Nicol Robinson.



June 2016 From left: Cr Nicole Johnston, Tim Robinson, Wendie Robinson Hirsch. Front: Lidia Fedin. (Photo: Southside News)

This paper has discussed the development of Robinson Park over the last two centuries. What unexpected outcomes may the future hold for Robinson Park in centuries to come?



Ficus Obliqua (Photo: Susan Chisholm)

Robinson Park, Fairfield Chronology

YEAR	EVENT
Pre1824	Yerongpan clan use the resource of the wetland for food, probably turtles, eels and edible plants and materials for dilly making. Campsite nearby.
1853	John Williams purchased 80 acre block centred around the Fairfield Swamp. Area used for crops and dairying by Grimes and others over the coming years
1884	Railway line constructed along Fairfield Road
1896	Railway line moved to current position
1898	James Nicol Robinson elected Alderman for North Ward, Brisbane Municipal Council
1900	James Nicol Robinson elected Mayor of Brisbane Bubonic plague outbreak
1931	Fairfield and District Progress Association request acquisition of Fairfield Swamp for children's playground and general sports area
1934	Fairfield Swamp resumption request by Ald Hefferan - BCC acquire 2.03 hectares through rates in arrears of £29/6/4 and £50 payment
1936	Swamp drained. Over the next 12 years the area is filled including a top layer of ash from Tennyson powerhouse
1948	Robinson Park named after reclamation and top dressing completed
1949	Rental to YMCA Soccer Club for 10 years at nominal rental i.e. to pay water and sewerage rates, cleaning dues, electric light, power and gas plus £500 improvements – erect dressing rooms, lavatories and lay a turf cricket wicket. Soccer field at Ashby Street end of park
1950s	Visiting circus, square dancing
1956	YMCA player Graham McMillan scores Australia's first goal at Melbourne Olympics. In 1957 he joined Leyton Orient in the English League to become one of the first Australians to play professionally in the UK. In 1999 he was inducted into Football Australia Hall of Fame
1958	Soccer field at Brougham Street end of park, clubhouse and toilets have been constructed
1959	YMCA lease for further 5 years at £10/10/- rental p.a. plus to pay water rates etc. plus £500 improvements plus park available for organized primary school sport on Friday afternoons and to BCC on all public holidays
1974	Robinson Park covered by Brisbane River flood
1975	Buildings in a state of bad repair Petition to BCC requesting demolition of sheds and toilets from local residents via Ald W M L Burton. Qld police report "undesirable element has been using the toilet block as a meeting place"

1980	Rovers Soccer Club lease for 5 years at \$500 p.a. plus water etc plus \$10 000 improvements, toilets, dressing facilities to be built in the first 12 months of the lease
1982	Rovers Soccer Club lease withdrawn, permitted to use on a tenancy basis until alternative lease area found. Reason given – pending roadworks
1986	Roadworks underway through Brougham Street/Fairfield Road corner
1988	Removal of galvanized play equipment Fairfield Road Project completed, plaque installed
1991	Concrete walking path evident
1995	Shade cover installed cost \$3528
2002	Trees growing beside concrete path
2011	Robinson Park covered by Brisbane River flood – man on jet ski
2014	Severe storm uproots many trees
2016	Robinson Park sign installed
2017	Replacement trees installed
2022	Robinson Park covered by Brisbane River flood

¹ *Stories of Stephens* Annerley Stephens History Group Inc 2017, p14

² Brisbane City Council Minutes 1931-32 p73 and 1934-35 p519

³ Brisbane City Council Minutes 1948-49 p901

⁴ Brisbane City Council Minutes 1948-49 p901

⁵ *The Robinson Boys and their Highfield, Nicol and Hollinworth Families* p116

⁶ *The Robinson Boys and their Highfield, Nicol and Hollinworth Families* p117-118

⁷ The term “Brisbane Municipal Council” is used here to distinguish the smaller council from the “Greater Brisbane City Council” formed in 1925

⁸ *The Worker* 29 Jan 1898 p9, *The Worker* was the monthly journal of the Federated Workers of Queensland

⁹ *The Worker* 29 Jan 1898 p9

¹⁰ *Brisbane Courier* 2 Feb 1898 p5

¹¹ *Queenslander* 9 April 1898 p5

¹² *Brisbane Courier* 13 Feb 1899 p4

¹³ *Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs General Advertiser* 13 Feb 1900 p3

¹⁴ *Brisbane Times* 23 May 2019

¹⁵ *Telegraph* (Brisbane) 22 Dec 1900 p14

¹⁶ Letter, City Solicitor’s Office 1 Sept 1953

¹⁷ Letter, City Solicitor’s Office 18 May 1959

¹⁸ Co-author Wendie Robinson attended this event see photo

¹⁹ Brisbane City Council Minute 41/1975-76

²⁰ Brisbane City Council Minutes 3213/1979-80

²¹ <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/storm-brisbane-2014/#:-:text=On the afternoon of 27,the size of tennis balls.>