

# History of Fairfield

This talk focuses on how the unique character of a community can arise from a combination of geography and social history. The community we will be talking about is of course Fairfield.

## Fairfield at Homely.com.au

(2) Great for

- Clean & green
- Parks and recreation
- Public transport
- Parking
- Internet access

(3) Not great for

- Nightlife
- Eating out

Who lives here?

- Professionals
- Families With Kids
- Retirees
- Singles
- Students

(4) Ranked 140th best suburb by locals in Brisbane Region, QLD

What about reviews? The first two reviews about Fairfield were written by real estate agents who thought Fairfield was a great place to buy a home. Then I found a review from Juz.

*(5) Fairfield is a fabulous suburb. My husband and I have lived here for nearly 20 years. There's lots of beautiful parks and greenery, a great little local shopping centre that houses Coles and other shops and a very strong community spirit.*

*With a range of housing options, Fairfield has been a great place to live when we were in our 20's - close to the city to go out. Great in our 30's when we were renovating and starting a family (lots of parks for those walks with the pram) and now we're in our 40's and our children are in school it gives us some great options.*

*State schools, private primary schools and proximity to high schools. University is just over the green bridge and we're close to the PA & Mater Hospital.*

## Fact checking Fairfield?

Wikipedia pros and cons. Starting with the cons (6)

- There are no schools in Fairfield. The nearest government primary school is Yeronga State School, while the nearest government secondary school are Yeronga State High School in Yeronga Brisbane South State Secondary College which opened in Dutton Park in 2021.
- No major businesses are based in Fairfield
- There are only two small churches - Fairfield Christian Family Church, 51 Cross Street (formerly Baptist Sunday School mission, 1940) and Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Catholic Church, 72 Victoria Road.
- There is no strip shopping or neighbourhood shopping precincts in Fairfield. However there is Fairfield Gardens at 180 Fairfield Road, which also includes a BCC library. The Fairfield Library opened in 1988 with a major refurbishment in 2011.

Now the Pros, according to Wikipedia (7)

- Fairfield has a Skate Park that caters for young people in the suburb.
- It has many other parks.

## Geography

(8) The small suburb of Fairfield (about 1.2 square kilometres) is situated about 5 km south of central Brisbane, and is generally a low lying area except for little hills at Castle Street and Wilkins Street. It rises to higher ground at its northern boundary with the South Brisbane Cemetery.

The suburb is mainly residential. Fairfield is bounded to the north by the South Brisbane Cemetery, to the east by the Beenleigh railway line, to the south by Venner Road and to the west by the Brisbane River. Adjoining suburbs include St Lucia, Dutton Park, Woolloongabba, Yeronga and Annerley.

Fairfield is part of the flood plain of Maiwar (Brisbane River) (9) and apart from regular inundations there were permanent wetland areas (10) in the vicinity of present day Robinson Park, Norm Rose Park, Fehlberg Park and Fairfield Park, as can be seen in this 1934 map. In recent times there have been three main swamps:

1. Between Victoria and Brougham Streets, mainly where Fairview Park is today.
2. West of Home Street, mainly where J.F. O'Grady Memorial Park and Robinson Park are today
3. An enormous area drained in the 1960s and filled with refuse, the string of green space and playing areas including Leyshon, Fehlberg and Hyde Road parks.

## Indigenous occupation

First nations people have lived in coastal South East Queensland for at least 20,000 years, moving inland as Moreton Bay and the Brisbane River took their present form around 6,000 years ago. (11) Map by Denis Peel

The Fairfield area and its surroundings were settled by the Yerongpan people, a Yuggera speaking Indigenous clan. The area south of the Brisbane River was extensively used and occupied. One 1840s resident recalled up to 400 First Nations people having seasonal camps on the ridges above the Woolloongabba waterholes. This would be the current Ipswich Road area of central Annerley.

The Yerongpan were known to fish and hunt in the scrub and waterholes of the Fairfield area. In fact the course of Annerley Road was a major aboriginal pathway from these hunting grounds and fishing spots to the Annerley ridge.

The area between Fairfield Station and Venner Road was most likely a clearing in the scrub allowing for regular periods of dwelling. Controlled burning could have been practiced to at least maintain this campsite and the pathways through the scrub. If you'd like to learn more about history before the arrival of Europeans there have been some informative articles in our books, esp. by Michael Macklin.

## Convict settlement

John Oxley was asked by the Governor of New South Wales to identify a suitable location for a penal colony in what is now Queensland. In December 1823, in Bribie Island, he picked up three castaways (John Finnegan, Thomas Pamphlett and Richard Parsons) who told him about a previously unknown river, which we know today as the Brisbane River. (12)

Oxley travelled as far up the river as Canoe Creek (known today as Oxley Creek). En route to the creek that would later bear his name Oxley stepped ashore on the riverbank between present day Fenton and Princess Streets around where the picnic table is located in Princess Street Park. He described it as the 'termination of forest land and the commencement of brush and cypress'.

Edmund Lockyer explored and mapped the Brisbane River in 1825. He described the Fairfield stretch as 'pretty spot, land good'. Edmund was a man of few words.

Between 1824 and 1842, the only official settlement in Queensland was the Moreton Bay Penal Colony. Mark Baker in a paper: *A twisted tale: the many roads to Ipswich* (published in RHSQ volume 24, No .8 Feb 2021) wrote about how the river was not useful for transporting cattle and sheep so convicts marked out some rudimentary trails to Limestone (Ipswich).

During this time convicts used Annerley Road, much as First Nations people had done, to walk up to the Annerley ridges. They referred to the pathway as the Boggo Track. They also followed a path from Annerley Road down to the river just beyond the cemetery to cut down timber. This path was first known as the Yeerongpilly Road but later it was referred to as Cornwall Street.

## **Early development**

The area was frequently flooded over several millennia, and the fertile land contained a number of lagoons interspersed with groves of tall timbers. The area around the lagoons remained dense scrub (13) well into the 1850s and was known to Europeans as the Boggo Scrub, a large district that extended as far as Rocklea.

Charles Melton, an early South Brisbane resident who played in the scrub as a child in the 1840s recalls “beyond the present cemetery, both banks of the river for many miles were covered with dense scrub. One loved to get deep into the dense and tangled growth, where orchids and staghorn ferns abounded. The wealth of the clouds had fallen on these jungles for centuries, and moisture and warmth had combined to provide the visitor with a feast of fat things.”

After free settlement commenced John Williams, the first free man to receive a trading licence in Brisbane (or Edenglassie, as it was often known in those days), sunk a shaft for coal in Fairfield in 1843 but the mine was fairly unproductive. He later went on to mine successfully in Redbank and Moggill. A legacy of Fairfield’s coalmining past is Newcastle Street, named after the famous coal mining town in England.

Several parcels of land covering 350 acres in Fairfield and Yeronga were offered for sale in early 1848, but had no takers at all. The land went on sale again in 1850 and had one taker, S.W. Bailey who established a farm based in what is now Fairfield Park.

The rest of the land that is modern day Fairfield was taken up in November 1853 by Louis Hope, George and William Grimes, William Connolly and John Williams (the miner). By 1857 George Grimes had founded an arrowroot farm called 'Fairfield'. At one time the Grimes family owned most of current day Fairfield and operated three farms and a dairy.

During the 1850s much of the land was cleared to make way for farms. The *Moreton Bay Courier* reported on 5 March 1859 that “the dense scrub bordering the river is fast disappearing beneath the sturdy stroke of the axe; and the patches of cleared grounds that meet the eye in this direction promise a speedy transformation in the hitherto monotonous aspect of our upriver scenery”.

The area was already being referred to as the Town of Fairfield in a newspaper land sale advertisement as in 1862. (14) Much of the land clearing was completed by 1865. In less than two decades, the scrub and other Indigenous vegetation of the suburb had become a thing of the past. However, while the land had been cleared for farming the wetlands still remained. (15)

## **Fairfield as a farming community**

The most popular crop grown in Fairfield was maize as it could deliver two harvests per year and it was often rotated with potatoes. Although there are reports of farmers having to deal with occasional flooding and their banana crops being destroyed by flying foxes, they managed to produce a surplus for the growing Brisbane markets.

Farms in Fairfield and Yeronga were the largest producers of arrowroot in Queensland. During the American Civil War 1861-65, some Boggo farmland was dedicated to cotton production to supply England and the Union side. When that venture proved unsuccessful some farms turned to sugar cane. The first sugar cane in Queensland was then being grown in the suburb across the river, which was called St Lucia after the sugar cane island of the West Indies. The severe winters of the 1870s killed off that experiment in Fairfield.

In those early days, German settlers had an important presence in Fairfield. Of the nine farmers listed as residing in Boggo in the 1874 Post Office Directory five had German surnames. Most of the German residents had market gardens along with traditional farms. (16)

## **Early infrastructure and famous houses**

In the 1860s there was little infrastructure of any kind in the Boggo District and the Brisbane Courier reports there were growing calls for schools and churches.

The Boggo National School (later to become the Yeronga State School) opened in 1868. The school was a community hub, hosting entertainments such as magic lantern shows and performances from the Oxley Amateur Christy Minstrels in blackface.

While the Grimes family had provided some land for the establishment of a small church in 1862, the major cultural developments in the area were the opening of the Fairfield Baptist Church and the Boggo Wesleyan Church at Yeronga Street, Yeronga; both in 1865.

The Fairfield Baptist Church, (17) a branch of the Vulture Street Baptist Church, opened for worship on Christmas Eve 1865 followed by a celebratory luncheon on Boxing Day. It was located on the corner of Dudley Street and Lang Street (now Lagonda Street) approximately 400 metres west of Ipswich Road. In 1889 a new church was erected on the same site (18) then it was relocated away from Fairfield to 560 Ipswich Road, where it was refurbished before re-opening as the Annerley Baptist Church on Saturday 9 February 1935.

The Grimes family bought nine acres at Yeronga in 1878 and built Kadumba, their first family home. George Grimes constructed another home in the 1890s at 135 Brougham Street, Fairfield, known as Ashby House. (19) It was home to the Grimes family until 1924.

Julius and Annie Wellauer, one of the prominent German farmers along with the Stimpsons and Hubners, acquired what is now 20 Castle Street in late 1900 and built a Federation-style house on the land, giving it the name of "Edelweiss". This is a photo of the house in 1912 at the time of some kind of celebration. (20) The Wellauers ran a dairy on their 8 acres at a time when Fairfield was a semi-rural district of maize, arrowroot and dairy farms. After Julius's death in 1916, the dairy was subdivided into house lots and sold-off. By 1946 it was surrounded by the present day Castle Street houses. (21)

Russell Wilkins settled at Irvinebank a home he built in Fairfield in 1892. (22) The extensive grounds were converted into beautiful gardens populated with peacocks, kangaroos and monkeys and a lake with black swans and carp. Every year on his birthday he would give a garden party here for all the local children followed by a Fireworks display. (Here is a photo of Irvinebank in 1911. The home still stands at 7 Redarc Street, (23) pictured when it was last sold in 2011 – exactly 100 years later.)

Apart from these grand homes, residential development was severely limited in Fairfield because of the swampy nature of much of the land, persistent flooding, and the predominance of agriculture.

### **Residential and transport developments**

The McKellar Cadastral map (copyright 1887) (24) shows a Hopeville estate in the north of Fairfield land between Cornwall Street and what is now Fenton Street. The land once belonged to Louis Hope (1817-94), who was the seventh son of the fourth Earl of Hopeton. After he acquired this land in 1853, it was known to some as 'Hope's scrub' before later becoming the Hopeville estate. An 1864 advertisement for land sales for 'Hopeville' described it as being, '...the richest scrubland in the colony' and 'unsurpassed for beauty of aspect and extensive view.'

There is no evidence that any residential properties were sold, so the estate continued to be farmed. By 1900, the South Brisbane Cemetery was becoming full, so in 1904 it was extended to incorporate the seven acres of the former Hopeville Estate between Princess Street and Cornwall Street. (25) The street names of the Hopeton Estate are still used in the Cemetery (26) with the addition of Ruddy Road, which was named after John Ruddy who owned and farmed the Hopeville Estate at the time of the expansion.

The key development in Fairfield was the opening of the South Coast Railway in June 1884, with a station near the current Victoria Street and Fairfield Road intersection. This diagram of the railway line in 1891 shows the topographic features of the area. (27) The train station was really just a siding for local produce and the cattle yards in Victoria Street. Despite its small size, the new station led to an increase in housing in the local area. The lack of late-night and weekend services, though, meant that it could still be a chore to get to town with locals having to walk up the hillside to Ipswich Road and travel to town by omnibus.

The original Fairfield Road ran from present day Tamar Street to Venner Road. It was not called Fairfield Road until 1884, previously being referred to by the locals as Lower Boggo Road. When the new Fairfield Road was built, this road was renamed Lang Street.

The new Fairfield Road was opened in 1886 and ran through the heart of Fairfield along the route of the railway line, terminating at Upper Boggo Road (now Annerley Road). The newspapers of the day reported that the local ratepayers complained about the awkward angle of the road bending around the eastern boundary of the cemetery. The citizens of Fairfield petitioned for the road to run straight through the cemetery instead but the trustees rejected the demand, and that awkward angle is still with us today.

This is a photo of Fairfield Road between Princess and Fenton Streets – where I live - around 1910. (28) This is a photo of a bus negotiating that dreaded curve in the road in 1948. (29)

Following the opening of Fairfield Railway Station three housing estates (30) were offered in fairly quick time:

- River View Estate (1884) which was largely in Annerley between current Mildmay Street and Ipswich Road, bounded by Cronin and Denham Streets.
- Fairfield Station Estate (1888) between Fairfield Road opposite the original station and the old course of Home Street. The Brisbane Courier said the sale was a rare and wonderful opportunity as the farmers of Fairfield “held on to their blocks tenaciously, refusing all entreaties to subdivide.
- Fairfield Park Estate (1889) between Ashby Street and Venner Road, Lagonda and Cross Streets.

Due to the low lying nature of the area, the railway track was underwater several times during the floods of 1890 and 1893 and had to be repeatedly closed. The line was subsequently duplicated and moved above flood level to its current position in 1896, leaving a strange legacy called Station Road (between Cross Street and Fairfield Road) that is now nowhere near a rail line.

The change in course of the rail line also meant Lang Street was split into four parts, eventually becoming Rusk, Tamar, Mildmay and Lagonda Streets. (31)

The sale of Fairfield Railway Station Estate (1914) completed the residential settlement of Fairfield Park that had been disrupted by the changed course of the railway line. (32) This subdivision of 28 residential lots for the land bounded by Bell Lane (now Bledisloe Street) to the north, the South Coast railway line to the east, Venner Road to the south, and Cross Street to the west. A public auction was held at the site on 29 August 1914, during the first frantic month of the First World War.

For all of its impacts for the suburb, for most of its life Fairfield Station has been a modest little affair. This is what the station looked like in 1977. (33)

Trams opened up access to many areas in inner Brisbane at the turn of the last century. A tramline had been extended from Highgate Hill to Dutton Park in 1901, and the subsequent efforts of the Brisbane Tramway Company to turn the recreation reserve at Dutton Park into a leisure resort during 1908-15 played a great part in boosting the popularity of the area. (34) There are reports of performances by the Tramway Band, for instance. Also, in 1916 the Dutton Park river baths were opened, providing safe swimming in an enclosure off the river bank. The baths closed in 1932. The last electric tram in Brisbane ran on 13 April 1969.

Farming continued in Fairfield for over 100 years, as shown from old photos and maps, and to this day there are still paddocks with horses grazing in the parks at the border of the suburb. This photo (35) looking down at Fairfield from Annerley, with the Denham Street underpass in the centre, is from a postcard dated around 1900, and shows how sparsely settled the area was.

After 1920 the wetlands of Fairfield began to disappear, being drained then infilled as garbage dumps and then, finally, top dressed and turned into parks. Over the next 30 years all the wetland was replaced by open grassy areas with avenues of planted trees including jacaranda and fig trees. A 1936 aerial photo (36) shows the watercourses and swamps mainly drained. Housing was mostly along Fairfield Road and higher land near the train station. The flood plain was still largely being used for agriculture.

### **Something other than farming**

In the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century we start to see some activities in Fairfield that were not farming! The first documented business I can find in the area is the R. Crump Family Butcher, who operated from Upper Boggo Road from the 1880s. The family are pictured here in 1894. (37)

Giovanni Pulle established the Fairfield Wine and Distillery Company in 1888 on Victoria Street, near the original railway station. Their wine, brandy and rum won awards at the Ekka, but distillery water flowing into local drains was a nuisance that blocked refuse pipes. Most stock was destroyed in the February 1893 flood and the business was sold the following year.

This was a common story in Fairfield. Small businesses would begin operations but find it difficult to maintain their profitability in the face of storms and floods. Fairfield did have mixed businesses and corner stores during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s in Lang Street, Denham Street, Byrnes Street, Ashby Street and

Sunbeam Street. They included the pictured one at 190 Fairfield Road. (38) Some of these shops traded until fairly recent times. I wonder if any of you ever visited this shop?

The major business in the suburb was George Tickle and Co, pictured in 1952, (39) which was a grocery distribution warehouse on the site of Fairfield Gardens that had a large fleet of trucks.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fairfield again became green. In the late 1960s the Brisbane City Council began planting trees along suburban street footpaths and in Fairfield parks, and residents were encouraged to plant native trees. The rate of planting escalated through the 1970s mainly in a bid to make Brisbane prettier for the 1982 Commonwealth Games. The riverbank also started to look different as thin bands of mangroves grew as dredging made this bend of the river much saltier.

Fairfield Gardens opened in 1987 with a supermarket and 36 other shops. The library opened in 1988.

For Fairfield, however, the most significant employment opportunities were now outside the suburb. The opening of the Tennyson Power Station on 26 March 1955 led to increased demand for worker accommodation locally. Here's a photo of the power station as it was being decommissioned in 1986. (40)

Next, the Princess Alexandra Hospital was founded in 1959. (41) It was built on the site of the 1883 Diamantina Orphanage, named after Diamantina Bowen, wife of the first Governor of Queensland, and the former Queensland School for the Deaf, which finally closed in 1988. It currently employs over 6000 staff.

Access to the University of Queensland improved after the launching of the St Lucia to Dutton Park ferry service in 1967 after 4000 petition signatures were collected the previous year by the UQ Union and presented to then Lord Mayor Clem Jones. (42) It was later learned that most of those signatures were written as part of a student prank at the front bar of the Regatta Hotel in Toowong.

The opening of the Eleanor Schonell 'Green' Bridge – Australia's first pedestrian, cycle and bus bridge – saw the demise of the ferry service in 2006. Over 8000 people are employed at the University of Queensland.

The current strange arrangement where Fairfield Road becomes a one way road and links in with Home and Noble Streets in a way that confuses everyone except for longtime locals dates back 2 March 1988, when the new Fairfield Road Project was completed and launched by Lord Mayor Sallyanne Atkinson. (43)

## **Demography**

Fairfield experienced significant flooding in 1890, 1893, 1930, 1974, 2011 and 2022. Some sources don't mention a 1930 flood; however (44) this is a photo of Fairfield Road in 1930 while this was the view of Fairfield from Dutton Park (45) in the same year. It definitely looks a bit damp to me. Another photo for those interested in floods. This is the view from Denham Street in 1974. (46)

The former swamp areas of Fairfield again proved to be efficient waterways in January 2011, conveying flood waters into Fairfield Gardens shopping centre and into houses around Fairview Park. Many houses south of the South Brisbane cemetery, between the river and Fairfield Road were also flooded. Fairfield Gardens shopping centre and library (47) were closed for six months until they reopened in mid-2011.

How does what we have learned today influence Fairfield's population and character?

Census information (48) backs up what we have said about Fairfield growing very slowly until the residential developments either side of the Second World War. There is some indication that population numbers fell after the 1974 and 2011 floods, and with the number of houses going missing in the suburb recently, I suspect the next census will show another population decrease.

Over time, we have seen a change in the characteristics of Fairfield residents too. (49) From farmers and farm workers for its first 100 years, during the post-second world war period we saw a rise in factory and manual labourers, and finally we now have a high proportion of students, academics, teachers and health workers living here. I wonder what R. Crump and family have made of this?