



BRISBANE GRAMMAR SCHOOL

## *Heritage Precinct*

*Brisbane Grammar School Environs:*

# **Indigenous Sites and Indigenous History**

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*and*

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*The site which Brisbane Grammar School now occupies at Spring Hill has always been a place of gathering and learning; a place of vibrant community and complex interaction; a place of deep spiritual significance.*

## About the authors

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Professor Benjamin Wilson is Head of College (College for First Nations) at the University of Southern Queensland. He brings a philosophy of utilising Indigenous ways of being and knowing to reshape and improve education systems. In 2023 he was awarded the Neville Bonner Award for Indigenous Education at the Australian Awards for University Teaching. Ben belongs to Jagera country and was School vice-captain at BGS in 2000.



### **Ray Kerkhove (left) and Ben Wilson at BGS – June 2023**

The school is grateful to Ben Wilson and Ray Kerkhove, colleagues at USQ, for their generosity of time and their academic expertise in the production of this paper.

## Life before European contact

Before European settlement, most of the area around Brisbane Grammar School – including Victoria Park – looked somewhat similar to what it does today, being an open woodland (open forest) of grassy fields with scattered large eucalypt trees: blue gum, apple, box, spotted gum and ironbark.<sup>1</sup>

There was also ‘dense scrub’ here and there of smaller bushes, such as wattles and forest oak (casuarina).<sup>2</sup> This was a region inhabited by gliders, koalas, possums, kangaroos and emus.<sup>3</sup> In springtime, as it does today, it attracted butcher birds and magpies, and during winter, willy wagtails.<sup>4</sup>

The spot was known for its springs and chains of small waterholes, the largest and most sacred of which ‘York’s Hollow’ still survives.<sup>5</sup> Today there is a sculpture at Walan (York’s Hollow) of an old man dancing with a large snake, with boys holding its eggs. This represents a corroboree once performed here, that concerned the creation of the Brisbane River by the Dreaming Ancestor (variously described as an eel, the rainbow serpent, or a carpet snake). She gouged out the valley as she slithered down from the mountains, fleeing Goanna. Goanna was after her eggs, which she carried in her mouth (carpet snakes look after their eggs). These spilt out at the river mouth, becoming the islands and people. Ever since, to release the rains, the First Nations peoples would regularly go to the waterholes that once existed at York’s Hollow, Chelmer, and Moggill, and watch as their rain maker dove in to ceremonially ‘cut’ the Dreaming Ancestor free from the bottom of the waterholes. The waterholes at Victoria Park were so beautiful that visitors to Brisbane habitually viewed them, as part of the ‘sights’ of the region. One of the main springs was at the School itself, which was also a quarry site.<sup>6</sup>

The waterholes were reedy, and some were surrounded by small stands of paperbark trees. They featured waterlilies, waterfowl, yabbies, eels and bream. First Nations people named the area after the bream (*Walan*).<sup>7</sup> Occasionally, with very big rains, the waterholes joined together and ran into Breakfast Creek.

Gullies and ravines around the waterholes – much of it now under the Inner-City Bypass – were surrounded by a thin fringe of rainforest including large figs.<sup>8</sup> These fingers of rainforest trickled down into the now CBD, where denser forest, rainforest and wetlands prevailed, thickest at what is now the Botanic Gardens.<sup>9</sup> The rainforest contained vines, bloodwood, cedar, black bean, palms, hoop pine, orchids, staghorns, and most of all, groves of tulipwood – the spear wood after which the CBD was named (*Meanjin* ‘like a spike (of a spear)’).<sup>10</sup> This jungle was favoured by scrub turkeys, bush rats, parrots and pigeons.<sup>11</sup>

The entire Spring Hill-Brisbane area was the core of the Yaggara/ Turrbal domain, which stretched up to the Pine Rivers, west to Moggill and south to the Logan River. It formed part of a thoroughfare along the Brisbane River. Consequently, it was used by many groups going to and from the bunya festival on the Blackall Ranges and towards Kilcoy. The river and creeks had many camps because it was such a rich area, and one of the main clusters of camps was at 'York's Hollow', which is now called Victoria Park. These were mostly used for post-bora tournaments and ceremonies relating to rainmaking.

## Campsites

Very close to Brisbane Grammar School lay seven sub-camps within 500 to 750 metres of each other. The closest occupied the ridges in Victoria Park along the south side of the Inner-City Bypass (Legacy Way), stretching from near the Centenary Pool, east towards the Ekka Grounds. It was the main camp of the local Brisbane (Turrbal) clan. Their other main camp was nearby at *Wilwinpa*, today's Wickham Terrace, close to the Windmill.<sup>12</sup>

At today's Normanby Hotel and Red Hill<sup>13</sup> stood camping grounds often used by visiting northern (Kabi) groups, whilst towards what is now Suncorp Stadium (Milton) and Petrie Terrace police station was the usual camp for western visitors – the peoples of Ipswich and similar areas.<sup>14</sup> Southern (Logan, Bay Island) peoples stayed at South Brisbane (near Musgrave Park). They probably also used the camp that once existed on the site of today's St John's Cathedral.<sup>15</sup>

These camps all occupied excellent positions. They were well above parts of the river that usually flooded. Within a short distance, they afforded many different environments with a range of foods, including kangaroos, fish and rainforest fruits. The undulating ridges permitted views to watch for game or send and see smoke signals. The area caught breezes. Its many waterholes and springs provided water, whilst the many large trees gave abundant bark for huts, wood for making utensils and firewood. The camps in Victoria Park were described as having 'ti-tree huts', being mostly roofed with paperbark.<sup>16</sup>

Internally, each camp was organised into one area for important Elders and their families; another for ordinary families; an area for single girls; an area for single young men; and a space for announcements and gatherings. This set of seven sub-camps were not far from a bora (ceremonial) ground that is now Bowman Park, near the Ekka grounds. A bora is one or more earthen rings, built for holding ceremonies. These were often surrounded by scarred and decorated trees, and images made of grass, clay or sand.

Within every camp, huts were spaced well apart, so probably much of what is now Victoria Park was on some occasions dotted with huts, because as many as 500 to 1,000 people could attend the larger inter-tribal gatherings.<sup>17</sup> However, for much of the year, camps were smaller – just seeing 20 to 50 occupants, or maybe only the odd straggler when the rest of the group was elsewhere.

First Nations people were constantly moving up and down the Brisbane River and its creeks, canoeing, hunting, gathering, firing the land, visiting relatives, and engaging in a range of sports, amusements and ceremonies. The Brisbane River – like much of south-east Queensland – had many different environments with many different animals and plants, none of which had predictable seasons. This meant that there was a lot of variation and diversity in what was fished, hunted, or gathered, although generally speaking, people were fishing in the rivers and down by the Bay in winter and moved up towards the cooler inland hills (away from flood waters) for much of the summer, concentrating on land animals and fruits.

Fishing and hunting were conducted mostly with nets, clubs and spears. There were oysters in the river then, and some of the oyster shells found in Victoria Park may date to these times.

## Tournament grounds

What is today the Exhibition Grounds, Victoria Park and Roma Street is an area that had a long history as a place of gathering for competition and recreation. The Brisbane Exhibition Ground was where Grammar's cricket teams would play sides from the Valley. Long before that, it was once the First Nations' post-bora tournament ground (*pullen pullen*). In fact, the Ekka site was mostly used for *kippas* (youths) to display their warrior skills. It covered the area that is now today's Ekka exhibition (show) ring and was used by the 'coastal' (Sunshine Coast) peoples.<sup>18</sup>

A *pullen pullen* was a large flat, open area where hundreds of warriors from diverse groups held ritualized battles and duels. This was an exciting sport that everyone came to watch. It resolved disputes and provided a means of punishing offenders who broke tribal laws, but it also gave men the opportunity to show their skills with diverse weapons and spears. The offending party were invited to camp near the tournament ground. Women elders 'opened' the event by dancing, planting yam sticks and lighting a ceremonial fire. After this, rows from both parties lined up and vented against each other. They would then discharge weapons long-range whilst their opponents stood their ground, using their shields

or contorting themselves to avoid being hit. After this, the two sides rushed in for one-on-one duels with clubs or stone tomahawks against shields. Any blood wound would cause a ceasefire or sometimes a re-match. The aim was to drive the other group off the field, or to inflict enough wounds that the issue was settled, after which the two sides – if they were satisfied – held a joint hunt or feast to seal their friendship. Despite the large number of warriors and the effectiveness of weapons, deaths and even serious injuries were extremely rare. One recorded fight involved 800 warriors. Another involved 1000 warriors.

What is today Roma Street Parklands was another *pullen pullen*. This one was used by inland groups. It became part of the playing fields of the original Grammar school. It is now a parkland.

## Work and trade

Already in the 1820s, some white explorers visited this area,<sup>19</sup> and the camps became quite important as regular contact points between First Nations and settlers. Events here were regularly reported in local newspapers.

By the 1840s to 1860s, many First Nations people stayed longer or camped here more regularly, so they could go to town to trade or sell fish, charcoal, orchids, bark, oysters, honey, firewood and other goods to the settlers.<sup>20</sup> They would trek daily to sell these items door-to-door or at the wharves, or to busk or beg.<sup>21</sup> Brisbane's early settlers depended heavily on First Nations people to provide the bark slabs they needed for building, and all their daily firewood, fish and other goods. Many settlers established ferneries and bush houses to keep ferns and orchids that First Nations people sold them.<sup>22</sup> In this way, knowledge and appreciation for local plants and flowers grew amongst the settlers.

Some First Nations folk stayed at the camps whilst working in town. They worked as boatmen, loading and unloading goods, or in settlers' yards and kitchens – gardening and cleaning. Others ran errands, supplied thatch for houses, constructed fences, jockeyed, or cared for horses, carted water to homes (there was no piped water back then), chopped firewood or hired themselves out as guides to settlers who wanted to go fishing or hunting.<sup>23</sup> It was often First Nations people who constructed some of the first homes for migrants coming from England, at the time.

This situation meant that the camps of the Spring Hill/ Victoria Park were important to colonial Brisbane. They sometimes had a population as large as that

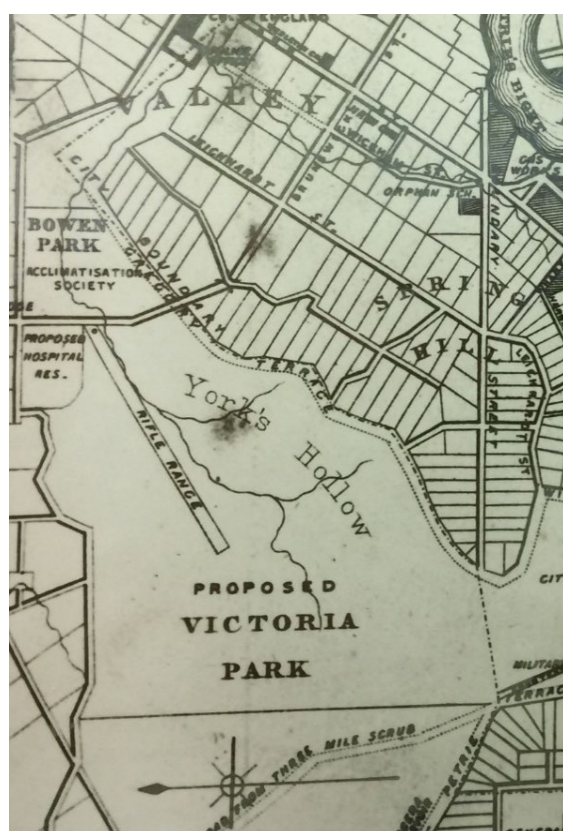
of the early town. When not working, the residents held traditional corroborees and *pullen-pullen*, or played various First Nations sports, including ball games and wrestling.

## Conflicts and resistance

There was often tension between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities of Brisbane at this time, with the non-Indigenous people committing several atrocities against their Victoria Park neighbours. For example, in 1846 (20 December), during a gathering of some 400 Aboriginals, a party of four to 10 whites led by Constable Peter Murphy tried to apprehend Jackey Jackey (an Aboriginal resistance leader from the Lockyer region) whilst he was staying at Victoria Park. This resulted in a confrontation with the campers, who opposed Murphy's action. Several Aboriginal residents were shot, wounded and some killed. The whole camp and its contents were burnt down, and many of the wounded fled.<sup>24</sup>

About two years later, a number of First Nations groups (from Brisbane, the Darling Downs and elsewhere) combined to evict a recent shipment of 56 Chinese workers, because they were setting up camp in Victoria Park. After a heated battle, the Chinese were ousted and had to be escorted by soldiers to the Darling Downs.<sup>25</sup>

The following year (28 November 1849), two divisions (24 soldiers) from the 11th Regiment stationed at the Military Barracks (now Queen Street) marched to Victoria Park and began shooting into the camps in response to an unfounded rumour about cattle killing. Some 100 to 500 Aboriginal people were resident at this time. A battle erupted. Boomerangs and other weapons were thrown at the soldiers. Between three and 12 Aboriginal residents were wounded, and most of the other residents fled to the Breakfast Creek camps.<sup>26</sup>





The camp at Wickham Terrace (near the Windmill) was especially involved in conflict. In 1841, Mullan and Ningavil (from the Scenic Rim area) were hanged at the Windmill for their attack the surveying party of Granville Stapylton, at Mt Lindsay (which saw two deaths). In 1847, Yilbung, a resistance leader, was apprehended at the Windmill when gathering a 'monthly flour rent' for his people. In 1855, a large number of First Nations warriors, from several groups, gathered here to protest the hanging of Dundalli, the resistance fighter.

It was around this time the first part of the former camps was set aside as a migrant camp, and by the early 1850s, police were evicting Aboriginal people from Brisbane town every evening and on Sundays.<sup>27</sup> They set one boundary at Gregory Terrace, which meant the Victoria Park camps were effectively just outside the town limits.

## When Brisbane Grammar School was founded

When the Grammar School was founded, John Hardgrave (later Mayor of Brisbane) had just settled in the vicinity. He was mocked for 'building among the blacks'.<sup>28</sup> John Philip recalled that Aboriginal people were still "numerous" here at the time.<sup>29</sup> Just two years earlier, half a dozen First Nations men were dispersed at Victoria Park by mounted police, when they were engaging in a traditional duel.<sup>30</sup>

By this time, however, the area was being taken over by settlers. Brisbane Council had cleared part of Reserve, to house the unemployed;<sup>31</sup> trees, a brick works and gates had been added.<sup>32</sup> Ten years earlier, the area was already being subdivided, cleared and sold, and most of the York's Hollow waterholes were so polluted and depleted that the springs around the school and further up were being used instead by settlers.<sup>33</sup>

A few years earlier, the Volunteer Rifles (Queensland's first army reserve) began using Victoria Park for arms practice.<sup>34</sup> In 1867, the Volunteer Rifles staged a mock battle in which they greatly frightened the First Nations residents.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, it was in Victoria Park that Brisbane Grammar's cadets fired off, during many rifle matches.

European presence did not prevent Aboriginal people from continuing to use the area as best they could. Despite the Volunteer Rifles' action, there was an exceptionally large *Empire Day* (Queen's Birthday) "blanket day" held earlier that year in Victoria Park. In this, many hundreds of First Nations people attended.

Empire Days (held in May) were huge events like Christmas, which celebrated the British Empire. The event featured processions, fireworks, banquets, and parties. Many First Nations people would come from great distances to see the spectacle. They would annually camp at Victoria Park to receive an honorary blanket each. In return they usually performed a corroboree for the settlers. The First Nations groups also used the occasion to regularly mock the British:

*...the aboriginal poet-laureate composed a distich which is chanted by the blacks at every court-house in the State on the receipt of the bounty. The words, quoting from memory, run something like this:*

*'Bictoria! Bictoria! (Queen Victoria! Queen Victoria!)*

*Berry well done, 'Jim Crow'! ('Very well done, you black lackey!)*

This is repeated with much gesticulation of hands, arms and waddies until the Sergeant issues the order, 'Shut up and clear out!'<sup>36</sup>

## Later use

Camping was still reported into the 1870s and even in the 1890s at Victoria Park and at Red Hill. By now, white workers, homeless squatters and recent migrants made the area their home and consequently it had several other uses.<sup>37</sup>

In 1876, a large portion was excised to create the first Queensland Exhibition (Ekka) Grounds.<sup>38</sup> The first exhibition honoured the survival of the colonies. As part of this, a medallion was minted to commemorate the event, in 1876. The medallion declared that King Sandy, the local main headman of Brisbane, was now 'ex-rex' (ex-King).



It was during this time that the last lagoons were drained and culverted after settlers used up and polluted most of the waters.<sup>39</sup> This, of course, made it more difficult for First Nations to live here anymore. Some would visit from time to time; for example, to box at the Ekka grounds.

Between the 1920s and 1950s, the area became a 'squatters camp' which included many Aboriginal families.<sup>40</sup> They lived here when they left the Aboriginal Reserves. Most were not accepted as tenants in suburban homes, due to racism

and their own poverty. They, therefore, lived in tents and makeshift huts in Victoria Park and other spots, doing odd jobs or whatever they could to survive. There are Brisbane Aboriginal families, whose elders once lived in Victoria Park, still alive today.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Archibald Meston, 'In Jungle Times', *The Daily Mail*, 1 December 1923, p. 9. See also Peter Young, 1990, 'The Vegetation of the Brisbane River', in P Davie et al, *The Brisbane River* (South Brisbane: Littoral Society), pp. 83-84; John Oxley in John G Steele, 1972, *The Explorers of Moreton Bay District 1770-1830* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press), p.111; Archibald Meston, 1895, *Geographic History of Queensland* (Brisbane: Government Printer), p. 52; 'Settlement of Brisbane--Links With the Early Days,' *The Telegraph*, 22 December 1932, p. 6; D. J. Hacker, D. R. Hallam, M. Spinaze, 1995, *Herston Recollections and Reminiscences* (Bowen Hills: Diana Hacker/ Queensland Women's Historical Association), p.1.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Spring Hill' mss, compiled by members of the 18/35 Group of the Queensland National Trust.
- <sup>3</sup> 'In Jungle Times', *The Daily Mail* 1 Dec 1923, p. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Brisbane in the Mid Fifties', *The Queenslander*, 7 August 1909, p. 20.
- <sup>5</sup> 'The Bunyip,' *The Beaudesert Times*, 30 July 1920, p. 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Meston, *Geographic History of Queensland*, p. 52.
- <sup>7</sup> Archibald Meston Papers JOL (John Oxley Library), OM 64 - 17/3, Box 8431.
- <sup>8</sup> 'In Jungle Times', p. 9, 'Brisbane in the Mid Fifties,' p. 20.
- <sup>9</sup> Clem Lack, 'Historic Brisbane — IV', *The Courier-Mail*, 26 June 1937, p. 19.
- <sup>10</sup> Archibald Meston, 'The Lost Tribes of Moreton Bay', *Courier Mail*, 25 August 1923, p. 19; Archibald Meston, Papers, JOL (John Oxley Library) Collection, OM64/17-1; Fred J. Watson, 'Letter to Editor', *Courier Mail*, 10 December 1932, p.14; James Porter Papers, JOL (John Oxley Library), OM Box 8642; Colleen Wall, 2008, *Redefining Aboriginal Pathways within Greater Area Brisbane Report* (Wynnum: Wanyiram), p.180
- <sup>11</sup> Archibald Meston, 'Genesis of the Park,' *Brisbane Courier*, 31 January 1921, p. 8.
- <sup>12</sup> Archibald Meston Papers, JOL (John Oxley Library), OM 64 - 17/3, Box 8431; Constance Petrie, 1904, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences* (Brisbane: Ferguson & Watson), p. 318; 'In the Early Days - Governor Bowen's Arrival', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 29 June 1927; 'The Early Days. When Creek Street was a Creek,' *The Brisbane Courier*, 9 January 1933, p. 10.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Long Trek Sported Good View', *Sunday Sun*, 16 December 1984, p.3; 'Kelvin Grove - A Fine Record of Progress Popular Residential area,' 23 August 1930, news clipping, *Ashgrove Library Local Studies MSS*.
- <sup>14</sup> 'The Early Days - When Creek Street Was a Creek', p.10; Frederick Stanley Colliver, Frank P. Woolston, and Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement. Archaeology Branch (1985). 'Aboriginals in the Brisbane area'. *Archaeology papers* No.6 (Brisbane: Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement), p. 61.
- <sup>15</sup> 'The Old Then and the New Now', *The Brisbane Courier (Qld)*. **12 November 1910**. p.13.
- <sup>16</sup> *Sunday Mail*, 21 October 1928, p.23.
- <sup>17</sup> 'The Early Days When Creek Street Was a Creek,' p.10.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Do You Know Your Brisbane?', *Sunday Mail*, 17 March 1929, p. 23. C.C. Petrie, 'Tom Petrie's Reminiscences', *The Queenslander*, 12 July 1902, p. 14.
- <sup>19</sup> Steele, *The Explorers of Moreton Bay 1770-1830*, p. 147.
- <sup>20</sup> James Porter Papers, JOL OM Box 8462.
- <sup>21</sup> Chas Melton, 'When Woollongabba was Wattle-scented,' 20 March 1915, *Melton Cuttings Book* MSS, RQHS (Royal Queensland Historical Society) Collection, No. 83.

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- <sup>22</sup> Beryl MacCallum, 2004, *Windsor Wakes: Residents and Notables of the 1860s* (Windsor: Windsor & District Historical Society), p. 4.
- <sup>23</sup> E. B. Kennedy, 1870, *Four Years in Queensland* (London: Edward Stanford), pp. 90-91; J. J. Knight, 1895, *In the Early Days - History and Incident of Pioneer Queensland* (Brisbane: Sapsford & Co.), p. 317.
- <sup>24</sup> *Moreton Bay Courier*, 3 February 1847, p. 2; 'The Aborigines - Moreton Bay', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 1847, p. 2; *Sydney Chronicle*, 24 February 1847, p. 4.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 14 April 1906, p. 6.
- <sup>26</sup> Raymond Evans (2004), 'Racial Assaults 1849: Victoria Park, Herston,' in Raymond Evans & Carole Ferrier, eds, *Radical Brisbane: An Unruly History*, Carlton North: Vulgar Press, pp. 35-7.
- <sup>27</sup> *Moreton Bay Courier* 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1858, p. 3; Domestic Intelligence, *Moreton Bay Courier*, 8 October 1853, p.2.
- <sup>28</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 6 October 1932, p. 34; 'Events of the Month 17th-21st January,' *Brisbane Courier*, 16 February 1863, p. 4; *Queensland Times*, 26 June 1926, p.4.
- <sup>29</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 28 May 1924: 18.
- <sup>30</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 26 Feb 1866: 2; *The Queenslander* 3 March 1866, p. 5.
- <sup>31</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 17 March 1866.
- <sup>32</sup> *Brisbane Courier* 9 May 1864, p. 2.
- <sup>33</sup> Gordon Greenwood & John Laverty, 1959, *Brisbane 1859-1959: A History of Local Government* (Brisbane: Council of City of Brisbane), p. 81.
- <sup>34</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 9 May 1864, p. 2.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Volunteer Review', *Brisbane Courier*, 16 December 1867, p.3.
- <sup>36</sup> *Queensland Figaro*, 22 May 1902, p.3.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Courier*, 20 March 1863, p. 2; *Nambour Advertiser*, 29 March 1864:2; *The Queenslander*, 25 March 1866, p. 3.
- <sup>38</sup> Meston, 'Lost Tribes of Moreton Bay', p. 8 Thom Blake in Rod Fisher, ed, *Brisbane - The Aboriginal Presence 1824-1850* (Brisbane: Brisbane History Group Papers No. 12) , p. 50; 'Kelvin Grove - A Fine Record of Progress Popular Residential area,' *Ashgrove Library Local Studies* mss.
- <sup>39</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 13 June 1883, p. 4.
- <sup>40</sup> 'Ugly Blot on Public Park: Dreadful Eyesore,' *Truth*, 6 December 1936; Jim Mulcahy, 'Hut Homes Mean Life with Little Hope,' *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 1 August 1954, p. 2.