

## **The Ralph Illidge Sanctuary**

A brief Early History by J.H. Seebeck. (Taken from a draft written in March 1983)

The Nullawarre region of south-western Victoria was not considered by the earliest settlers to be attractive pastoral country, and so it was not until 1870 that the Brucknell Creek run of 40,000 acres was licenced, the licensee being Angus Cameron of Cobden. However, from the early 1840's to 1861 some portions were used, illegally, by John McMahon Allan who held the adjoining run. The Brucknell Creek run licence, by then held by John Walsh was forfeited in December 1872, and in the summer of 1874-5, contract surveyor Louis Dillon carried out the first survey of the Parish of Nullawarre.

Crown allotments 69A and 70A were purchased by James Beasley for the upset price of £1 per acre, a total of £280. Title passed to him on 2 June 1883. James Beasley died in 1935, leaving the property to his widow. Four years later the block was subdivided, and Crown Allotment 70A, of 199 acres 3 roods 9.4 perches was sold to James Beardsley and John McLaughlan of Warrnambool. Inherited by Harry Beardsley on his fathers death, it was eventually sold to Ralph Illidge in 1958, title being finally granted in June 1961. Later in 1961 the allotment was subdivided and the southern part (99 acres 3 roods 11 perches) was sold to Leslie and Margaret Russell.

In 1974 Ralph Illidge announced his intention to give the remaining property, (about 100 acres), now called "Bimbimbi" to the people of Victoria, and on 14 February 1975 handed the title to the Hon. W.A. Borthwick, the then Minister for Conservation, to be administered by the Victoria Conservation Trust as the Ralph Illidge Sanctuary.

Ralph George Illidge was born on 8 March 1903, the son of Henry Illidge (formally of Camperdown, Vic.) and Alice Marion nee Ackary (formally of London, England and Rockhampton, Qld). Henry Illidge had been an engraver by trade, but when photography began to take the place of engraving in the commercial world, he left the business in Melbourne and travelled to W.A. where he

met and married Alice, then nursing at Cue. The family lived first at Claremont where Ralph and his elder brother Ernest were born and then moved to Lesmurdie.

After his father's death in 1920 Ralph worked for a Perth wholesaler, but he had already become a keen amateur photographer. He soon turned this interest into a profession, and for a while was an itinerant photographer, working mainly in the south-west of W.A. This experience perhaps sowed the seed for his later identification with the natural world - he was particularly taken with the beauty of the Stirling Ranges. Later he set up a photographic business in Perth, but the Depression of the late 1920's forced this to close.

Ralph's other love was singing. He had a fine bass voice, and was trained by Count Filipini. He sang in operas produced by Philipini, and came thus to Melbourne in the early 1930's. He joined one of J.C. Williamson's touring companies and travelled throughout Australia and New Zealand. But he still saw photography as a career, and at the conclusion of the tours set up as a commercial photographer in Melbourne. His mother came to keep house for him. (He had married Olive Pierre-Humbert in 1929, in Perth, but the marriage was unsuccessful. They were finally divorced in 1964)

In 1941 he joined the A.I.F. and served in the Middle East and New Guinea. He was official photographer for his unit.

After the war he worked for a short time in Melbourne before purchasing the photographic business in Warrnambool which was to be his livelihood until his "retirement" in 1969.

Ralph's early love of the bush was reinforced during his many assignments and explorations around the district, and he conceived the idea of a "bush block". At first he envisaged running cattle on the property, and to that end the central part of the block was cleared, local sawmillers removing the millable logs. But Ralph soon realized that the bush and its birds meant more to him than cattle, and so he allowed the bush to regenerate. He gradually began to prepare "Bimbimbi" as his retirement home, painstakingly clearing walking tracks through the bush, and planting native shrubs near the projected home site, and collecting materials for the house.

In 1970 the house designed by William ? of Vermont was built. Low-set, the outer walls were of bluestone salvaged from the Mortlake Gaol and a disused bridge near Darlington. The chimney place and some of the interior were lined with flintstone which Ralph had obtained from a century-old courtyard. The floor of the living-room was parquetry, and the large windows afforded an intricacy with the garden and its birds. Ralph installed birdbaths and feeders and a small pond, and delighted in the many and varied feathered visitors. "Bimbimbi" means place of many birds and this was certainly true. The dawn chorus in springtime was almost deafening, and the bush seemed alive.

Ralph welcomed other visitors too, and eventually improved the walking tracks, built picnic tables and a barbecue and generally enjoyed the company of the others seeking the pleasures of the bush.

He was active elsewhere in the community that he loved, and worked tirelessly for Legacy as well as the Chamber of Commerce and the Warrnambool Field Naturalists Club.

In 1967 I began a study on the potoroo, a small wallaby, of which little was known in Victoria. During a field trip to the district I met Ralph Illidge at a Field Naturalists Club meeting, and he invited me to visit his bush block. I did so, but it wasn't until 1971 that I was able to return and properly assess the area as a study site. Ralph was by that time settled in his home, and only too happy to encourage scientific investigations.

We began work in earnest in 1972, and for the next three years I visited "Bimbimbi" every month, camping under a fine manna-gum a couple of hundred metres from the house.

Our study routines involved the daily setting and checking of live-traps for small mammals, especially the potoroos. Ralph took his usual keen interest in our activities (often recording them on film) and we talked at great length about the bush and its inhabitants. He was concerned that after his death the property might be cleared, and so he was seeking some solution to this problem.

He had made approaches to the National Parks Service but the property was not then considered suitable for inclusion in the system.

The Victorian Conservation Trust had been constituted in 1972, and it seemed that this might be the answer. Ralph embraced the idea and it was arranged that he should deed the property to the Trust, but remain as caretaker until his death. The formal hand-over took place in February 1975 and Ralph died on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1975, at the age of 72. In accordance with his wishes his body was cremated and the ashes scattered around the garden at "Bimbimbi" on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1975.

With Ralph's death a new phase in the story of the Sanctuary began.

The Victoria Conservation Trust appointed Michael O'Brien as caretaker, and a Committee of Management was formed, with members from the Trust, Fisheries and Wildlife Division, National Parks Service, Shire of Warrnambool and Shire of Warrnambool Nature Reserves Society. (Members of the Committee and their affiliations are listed in Appendix 1.) The inaugural meeting of this Committee was held on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1975, and Douglas Fenwick was elected Chairman, a position he was to hold for four years.

The Trust produced Terms of Reference, the major objectives being:-

- (a) to administer, manage and control the Ralph Illidge Sanctuary,
- (b) to conserve, manage and control native flora and fauna there-on,
- (c) to maintain the natural environment of the Sanctuary,
- (d) to maintain in a satisfactory condition of repair all buildings and structures in the Sanctuary, and
- (e) subject to the foregoing, to provide for the education and enjoyment of visitors and to encourage and control such visitors.

The Committee was empowered to do all things convenient to achieve these objectives, subject to technical advice concerning wildlife conservation from Fisheries and Wildlife Division and National Parks Service.

During the next 18 months the Committee began the development of a long-term management plan. Of major concern was fire security, and so a tractor and trailer-mounted fire-fighting unit was purchased, to compliment the Fire Plan that had been drawn up after consultation with the Country Fire

Authority. Publicity for the Sanctuary was provided for with an Open Day, a brochure, invited educational and natural history groups and signposting. A nature trail was marked out and notes prepared.

The need for adequate carparking, toilets and better picnic facilities to cater for increasing numbers of visitors became apparent, and these mundane matters occupied much of the Committee's time for the next year or so.

Various fund raising schemes were mooted but none were successful. Toilets were eventually built, mostly by the volunteer labour of the Warrnambool Natures Reserves Society, and barbecues provided. Another Open Day helped ease the financial burden. In March 1979 Michael O'Brien resigned, and in May of that year Bill and Anne Fraser were appointed as caretakers. Laurence Hose was elected Chairman of the Committee. Routine maintenance of the Sanctuary continued, with the major item an upgrading of the water supply by the addition of a 30,000 litre concrete tank.

Public involvement was improved. A 'Touch Trail' was installed, the Nature Trail upgraded and a permanent outdoor display mounted.

The stream of visitors continued, and despite some minor vandalism most visitors left with an enhanced appreciation for the bush and its inhabitants.

As well as my own studies at the Sanctuary, many other aspects of the natural history of the area have been recorded by local and visiting naturalists, students and of the caretakers. Detailed lists of plants, birds and mammals have been prepared, and the Frasers have had a never-ending supply of patients to their registered wildlife shelter. In 1980 Andrew Bennett, from Melbourne University began a study of the mammals in remnant bush in the district and became a frequent and welcomed visitor to the Sanctuary.

This interest in the Sanctuary and its wildlife stems largely from the historic development of the Naringal district. Following closer settlement, land use changed from occasional rough grazing to more intensive farming. Forests were painstakingly cleared, the timber often providing the pioneers

with an income from posts and slabs. Barley and potatoes were early crops, but gradually, as the forests were cleared, the swamps drained and access improved, dairying became the mainstay of local agriculture.

However, the area around the Sanctuary remained uncleared, despite increasing demands on the land. Even the Bailey Settlement Scheme of the 1930's, at Naringal East had little effect. Maps from 1942 and aerial photos taken in 1947 show little change in forest cover. But during the 1950's and 1960's quite dramatic changes did take place, and the Sanctuary became one of a small, ever-decreasing number of islands of forest in a sea of improved pasture.

Most of these bush blocks were subjected to grazing, occasional timber-getting or burning. However Ralph had determined the future for his land, and thus its value as a conservation area was enhanced.

The numbers and diversity of the wildlife of the Sanctuary and its environs provide ample evidence of its importance for local conservation.

Twenty-four species of mammals have been recorded, most of them native species - 2 monotremes, 12 marsupials and 10 placental mammals - and we know that several other species of bats are probably present.

Plants are well represented in this mixed open forest - some 70 species of ferns and flowering plants and many species of fungi.

But it is the birds which catch the attention - from the ever-present Yellow Robin to the Stately Powerful Owl. Birds are everywhere - nearly 70 species, many breeding, and almost all readily visible to the watcher.

To the nature-lover, be they old or young, expert or beginner, amateur or professional or to the tourist seeking something different, or the city-dweller seeking peaceful bushland, the Ralph Illidge Sanctuary was a haven. To me, it was a very special place, and I will ever be grateful to Ralph for sharing it with me.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> February 1983, Ash Wednesday, wildfire stormed across the district, destroying homes, farms, forests and the Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. Bill and Anne Fraser escaped with minutes to spare but the home and Sanctuary created by Ralph Illidge was burned to the ground, together with most of the wildlife it supported.

The natural world is resilient and the forest will grow again. The Committee has decided that a house/education centre will be re-built, and in time, the wildlife will return.

### **Bibliography**

**Correspondence from:** Surveyor-General, Division of Survey and Mapping, Victoria.  
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Mrs L. Halford, formally of Naringal East, now of Kerang.  
Titles Office, Victoria.  
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**Members of Committee of Management 1975 - 1983**

<b>Warrnambool Nature Reserves Society:</b>	Bill Alford	1980 - 1983	
	Shirley Duffield	1980 - 1983	
	Doug Fenwick	1975 - 1980	* ^
	Tom Jeavons	1975 - 1978	*
	Lawrence Hose	1975 - 1983	* ^
	Jim Parker	1977 - 1980	
	Charlie Rutter	1979 - 1983	
	Stewart Wallace	1978 - 1983	
<b>Shire of Warrnambool:</b>	Tom Wilton	1975 - 1976	*
	Norm McConnell	1976 - 1983	
<b>Victoria Conservation Trust:</b>	Ian Wilton	1975 - 1983	*
	Michael O'Brien	1977 - 1979	#
	Bill Fraser	1979 - 1983	#
<b>Fisheries and Wildlife Division:</b>	John Seebeck	1975 - 1982	*
	Gavin Cerini	1982 - 1983	
<b>National Parks Service:</b>	Jim McHugh	1975 - 1979	*
	Andy Arnold	1980 - 1983	
<b>Crown Lands and Survey:</b>	Jim Rowney	1979 - 1983	

\* = Foundation Members      ^ = Served as Chairman      # = Caretakers



